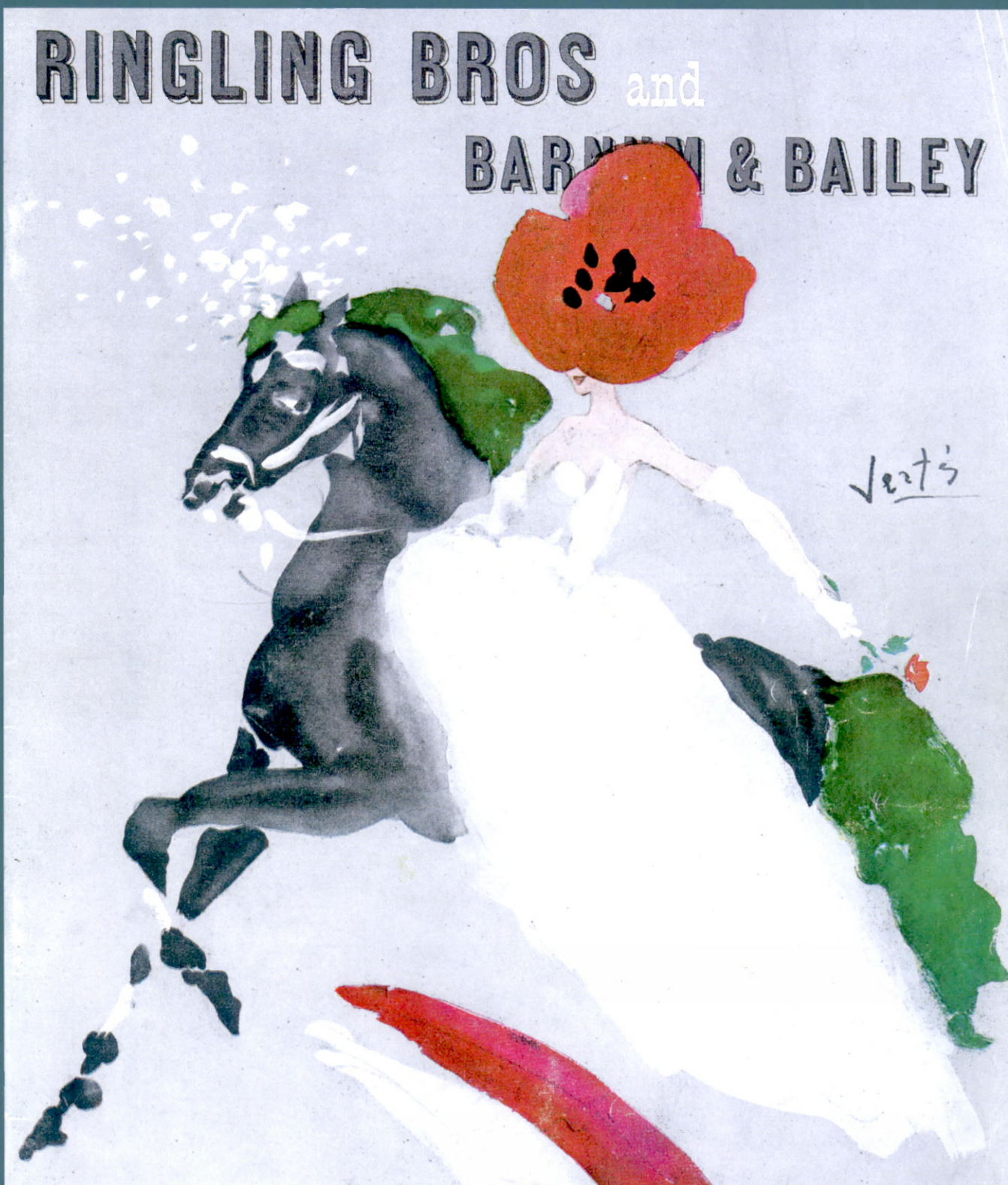


Bandwagon

Vol. 59 No. 1 2015

RINGLING BROS and BARNUM & BAILEY



The Journal of the Circus Historical Society

Circus Historical Society

The Circus Historical Society's mission is to preserve, promote, and share through education, the history and cultural significance of the circus and allied arts, past and present.



Frederick W. Glasier, Barnum & Bailey circus, circa 1905

Courtesy of The Ringling Museum, Frederick W. Glasier Collection

Founded in 1939, the Circus Historical Society, Inc. (CHS) is a tax-exempt, not-for-profit educational organization. Membership includes people from all walks of life including historians, scholars, circus personnel, memorabilia collectors, Americana specialists, and individuals who share both a love of the circus and a desire to preserve and disseminate its great and interesting heritage.

Benefits of membership include a subscription to CHS's journal, *Bandwagon*. The journal features a range of research and articles related to the rich history of the circus. Article types vary from intensively researched historical essays to wonderfully vivid oral histories that capture the stories of individuals from all aspects of the circus world. Members also receive newsletters filled with fascinating circus facts and news from members, circuses, museums, and other related groups around the world.

CHS members gather annually at a different location in North America to hold a convention. Papers are given, films and slides are presented, meaty tidbits of circus history are exchanged, current circus executives set forth their views and challenges, friendships are renewed and new ones made, all in the interest of circus history preservation. These sessions represent the culmination of a focused year of circus research and writings on the part of many CHS members and are cherished visits to the circus past and present.

**For information on joining the Circus Historical Society,
visit the website at: www.circushistory.org**

Editors

Jennifer Lemmer Posey,
Editor
chsbandwagon@gmail.com

Fred Dahlinger, Jr.,
Associate Editor

Bandwagon: The Journal of the Circus Historical Society (USPS 406-390) (ISSN 0005-4968) is published by the Circus Historical Society for its members.

Office of Publication

1075 West Fifth Avenue,
Columbus OH 43212 with
additional entry at Jefferson
City MO. Periodical postage
paid at Columbus OH and
additional entry offices.
Postmaster: send all address
changes to Bandwagon: The
Journal of the Circus Historical
Society, 1075 Fifth Avenue,
Columbus OH 43212.

Membership Rate

Circus Historical Society
membership is \$60.00
annually in the United States,
\$80.00 annually in Canada,
and \$105.00 annually for
international members.
Membership application and
information are available on
the CHS website at www.circushistory.org or by
contacting the Bandwagon
office.

Website and Back Issues

An index of Bandwagon
articles from earlier issues
is available online at www.circushistory.org. Back issues
are available from the Office of
Publication.

Bandwagon

The Journal of the Circus Historical Society
2015 Volume 59, Number 1

Table of Contents

Note from the Editor 4



On the Cover 5

The Circus Designs of Marcel Vertès

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey



Lottie Aymar 6

Circus Star

by John Daniel Draper



Miss Minnie Fisher 16

The Intrepid Acts and Remarkable Life

by Maureen Brunsdale



Season of 1956 32

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey

by William C. Taggart

Circus Historical Society

circushistory.org

Mission Statement

*"To preserve, promote, and share
through education the history and
cultural significance of the circus and
allied arts, past and present."*

2014 Officers

President

Deborah W. Walk
Sarasota, FL

Vice President

Don Covington
Coronado, CA

Secretary-Treasurer

Robert Cline
Cheraw, SC

2014 Board of Trustees

Chris Berry Scottsdale, AZ	Joe Parker Dallas, TX
Maureen Brunsdale Normal, IL	Fred D. Pfening III Columbus, OH
Alan Campbell Johns Creek, GA	John Polacsek Detroit, MI
Stephen T. Flint Janesville, WI	Al Stencell Toronto, ON
Stephen Gossard Bloomington, IL	M. Lane Talburt Stratford, CT
Judith L. Griffin Appleton, WI	Matthew Wittmann Denver, CO

Trustees Emeritus

Dave Price Robert Sabia	Richard J. Reynolds III William Slout
----------------------------	--

Note from the Editor

To my mind, the most wonderful thing about studying the circus is that there is something for every interest. Some love the logistics, for others it is the costumes or the choreography, or the art of specific types of performance. Histories of business, railroad, music, advertising, and so many disciplines come alive through the lens of the circus. Trained as an art historian, I have always been drawn to the visual culture of the circus. I am fascinated by the connection between American circuses and commercial printers – a symbiotic relationship that brought out the best in both industries. This personal interest translates to the pages of *Bandwagon*, and with this issue, we have updated the layout and changed our cover to take advantage of the beautiful printing that is possible today. John and Mardi Wells have worked even harder than usual to bring together these changes and I am grateful to them.

I know how much the CHS membership appreciates the illustrations that accompany the articles and we are so fortunate to draw on the resources of a variety of rich circus collections to bring to life the words on the page. Mark Schmitt at Illinois State's Milner Library and Pete Shrake at Circus World Museum have provided amazing images for our pages once again. Those images illustrate stories by Maureen Brunsdale and Dan Draper that recount the histories of two remarkable performers, Minnie Fisher and Lottie Aymar.

We are very fortunate to have, in this issue, Bill Taggart's memoirs of the 1956 Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey season. Bill worked in the ticket wagons and had a unique perspective and experience on the show, especially in terms of the 1956 season, when he was one of the first employees to receive news that the end of the Ringling tented era had arrived. His article gives an understanding of the few highs and many lows of that fateful season. I owe a special thanks to Kenny Dodd for bringing Bill to The Ringling Museum for a visit. We were able to spend some time together talking about his experiences in 1956 and selecting the images to illustrate the article. It was a wonderful day and resulted in an article I am sure that CHS members will enjoy.

JLP

*"Violet Girls" design for
Say It With Flowers spec*

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

On the Cover

The Circus Designs of Marcel Vertès

by Jennifer Lemmer Posey

Describing the 1956 showing of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, *New York Times* critic Michael James wrote that "...it is was all very pretty, frilly and delicate, and not at all the robust and gilded foolishness that was so much fun for so many in the past."¹ This contrast of aesthetics, from the vividly hued, whimsical imaginings of Miles White to Vertès' fluid pastel visions was a tremendous change to the aesthetics of the American circus. According to press, the circus would be "more like champagne than soda pop" as "everything from costumes to clowns' gags [would] bear the elfin touch for which Vertès [was] famous."²

Hungarian born artist Marcel Vertès (c. 1895 to 1961) was noted for his paintings and illustrations as well as his scenic and costume designs. In reviews, the artist's name was often found among such well known modern artists as Miro, Chagall, and Picasso.³ In 1953, Vertès won two Oscars for his work on both the set decorations and costume design for the film *Moulin Rouge*.⁴ This was the same year that *The Greatest Show on Earth* was recognized as Best Picture.

Vertès' designs for the 1956 season were perfectly aligned with his celebration of "the bright side of life" combined with an open display of sensuality, from the curve hugging gowns worn by ladies in the ring to the midriff baring costumes of the spec girls.⁵ The air of elegance intended by the artist's choice of a limited and pastel palette

was perhaps undermined by the "economy in the staging" which was noted by the *Billboard* review of the show.⁶

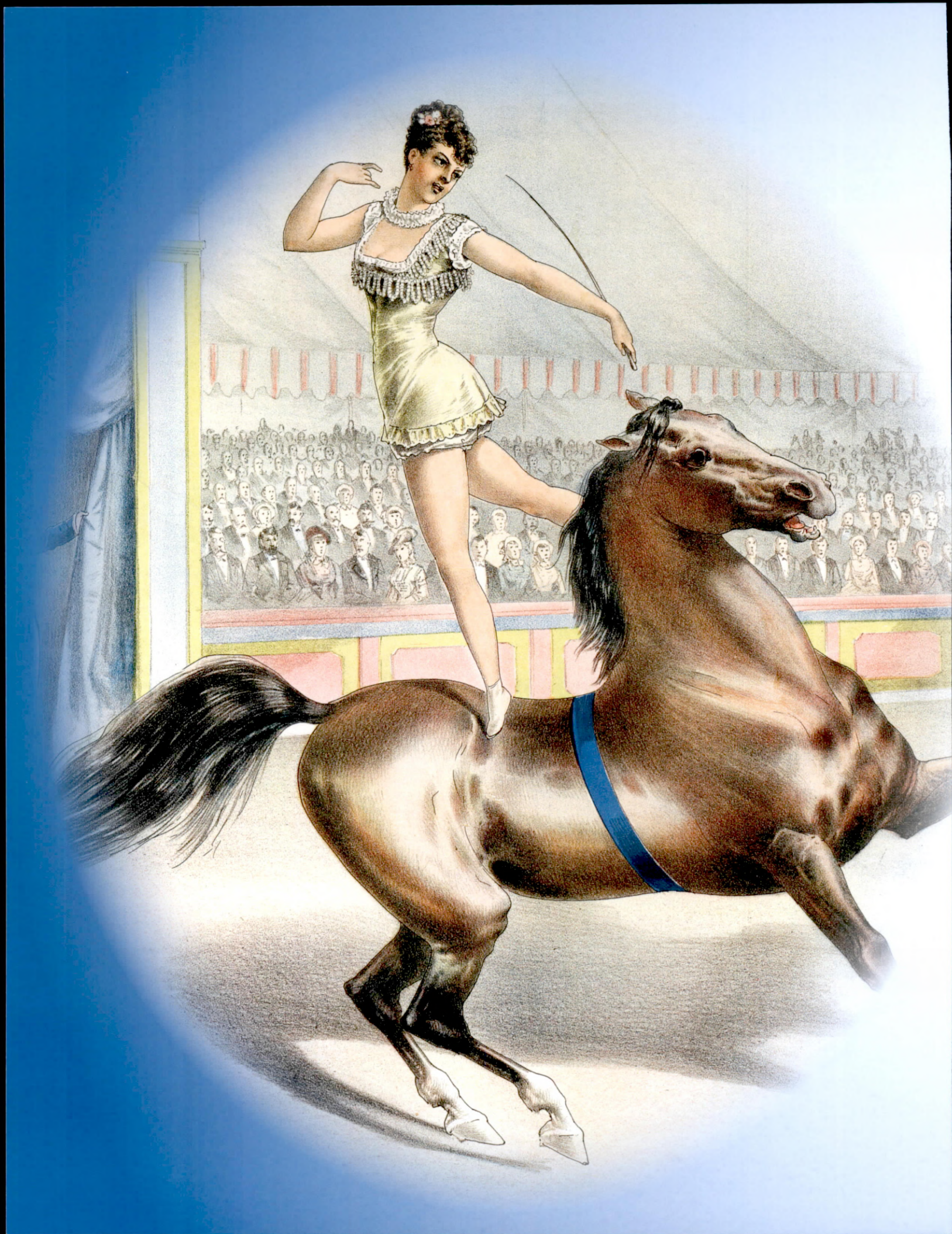
The watercolor that graces the cover of the 1956 program (and this issue of *Bandwagon*) was destined for a life beyond the circus office. In conjunction with the opening of the Ringling show at Madison Square Garden, Vertès held a solo exhibition of his paintings at Carstairs Gallery in New York. The art critic wrote that "The decorative aspects of the big spectacle lend themselves nicely to Vertès' style – an air of smart unreality..."⁷

Although the art was heralded as being "very deft and adept in the light airy manner Mr. Vertès' admirers have come to expect," the circus fans were left wanting. Vertès' contributions did not win the acclaim of other talents that have "run away with the circus," still, he was part of a distinguished tradition. Harnessing the unique vision of a leading talent in the world of fine art, be it visual arts, theater, music or dance is an important way for the circus to stay in sync with cultural trends. From Imre Kiralfy to Norman Bel Geddes, Miles White to Erté, or John Phillip Sousa to Stravinsky, extraordinary artists have infused bold new energy into America's finest circus productions.

Endnotes

1. Michael James. "Circus Opens Run in Old-Time Style," *New York Times*, April 5, 1956, p. 16.
2. Ibid.
3. "Museum to Offer 19th Century Art," *New York Times*, November 4, 1946, p. 40.
4. Thomas M. Pryor. "Movie's Oscar won by Greatest Show," *New York Times*, March 20, 1953, p. 25.
5. "Marcel Vertès, Painter..."
6. Jim McHugh, "Big One: From Troubled Seas a Great Show," *Billboard Magazine*, April 14, 1956.
7. Howard Devere. "About Art and Artists," *New York Times*, April 6, 1956, p. 47.





Lottie Aymar

Circus Star

by John Daniel Draper

At the tender age of four, Lottie Aymar travelled to Callao, Peru from San Francisco with her parents, Walter and Margaret (Manley) Aymar.¹ It was in South America that Lottie's professional career as a talented equestrienne, and later, a skilled trapeze artist, first began. By the end of her forty-eight years of performing, Lottie had graced the rings of some of America's top circuses.

Lottie was born into a talented and renowned circus family. The Aymars were acclaimed as "unequaled in the annals of equestrianism." Her father, Walter was a circus owner and one of the most famous bareback riders of his time. As early as 1840 he was on the Great Western Circus and in 1842 he was on June, Titus, Angevine & Co. as a rider. In 1843 on Howes & Mabie's New York Circus, Master Walter stood on the rider's head while the horse ran at full speed. This act caused the greatest excitement and was acknowledged to be a perfection of art, courage, and elegant horsemanship. Master Walter was on Sands, Lent & Co.'s circus in 1847 and again in 1849. For Nichols and Ormond in 1850 he was called the "modern centaur and great bareback trick rider." At Zanesville, Ohio on August 20th, 1851 Walter Aymar was proclaimed as "another bright luminary in the equestrian hemisphere, who, either as a scenic or bare backed rider could defy the world." The following year at the same location he was a "dashing equestrian and living

model of the Apollo Belvedere." Also on the Floating Palace in 1852 he was an equestrian and general performer. Walter was on Spalding & Rogers circus in 1854 and in 1855. He was advertised as the "only bareback rider in the world." In a John Robinson's circus ad in a Cincinnati, Ohio newspaper in 1856 Walter B. Aymar was called "a great bareback and quatre-cheval rider."

Walter spent his winters in Elmira, New York and while staying there a number of years before, he met Maggie Manley, a young woman who had been reared in the family of David Shears. Maggie had been trained as a wire walker and was a talented circus aerialist. Aymar and Miss Manley fell in love and were married. They had their daughter, Charlotte, in January of 1857. A son William was born a few years later.

In May of 1860 the *New York Clipper* reported that Walter Aymar, his brother William and several others had formed the California Circus Company and were set up to perform near San Francisco.² By December, the members of the company were making plans for a five-year tour in South America and then on to the Pacific circuit.³ They had purchased a ship, painted it, and fitted it with a stable suitable for sixteen horses. Walter was to be equestrian director as well as bareback and four horse rider. His wife was to perform as equestrienne. And, for the first time mentioned

in the *Clipper*, "Little Lottie, the equestrienne phenomenon" was listed as part of the company.⁴ Although Mrs. Aymar was mentioned performing in California in June of 1861, the troupe, titled the United States Circus, sailed from San Francisco for Callao, Peru in October of 1861.⁵ After two nights in Callao, the troupe moved on to Lima, where they played in the theater for a full month.⁶ The mother, after receiving permission from the priests, ascended a tight wire from the plaza to the top of the cathedral.⁷ Once before she had attempted a similar exhibition from the street to the upper story of a San Francisco hotel.⁸ The crowd witnessing the exhibition in Lima contributed generously and the circus was able to continue on its way once more. In Ca-

dova, South America Walter B. Aymar's circus showed in 1866. Walter was the featured principal rider and his seven year old daughter was a bareback rider. The wife also rode. He had Jerome Ravel and six other performers as well as twenty-one American horses and ponies and twenty-three pack mules on the show.

Continuing through the interior of the country on horseback they crossed muddy and swirling rivers and struggled through a desert where there was no sign of vegetation. Lottie rode astride her own little pony as courageous and self-reliant as the other members of the company. At Mendoza the company was captured by Indians and herded into their camp. The members of the community,

in order to save themselves, put on a circus exhibition that they had to repeat for two weeks. They then packed all their equipment on the mules and the Indians allowed them to depart.

While touring Uruguay and Paraguay, the Aymars made plans for Lottie's future. The parents, not desiring their daughter to follow the circus life as a performer, decided to sell the circus and they bought a farm twenty miles from Parana, Argentina. Lottie, much against her wishes, was sent to a boarding school at Buenos Aires to study music, Spanish and French. She was an adept pupil in Spanish but ignored everything else. She longed to be with her parents and follow again the nomadic trail to which she was accustomed. After two years Margaret and Walter, in answer to a restless urge, bought a three masted schooner to accommodate their circus outfit and began a tour along the coast of Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro they met Nathans with his company. After three years Aymar bought out Nathans in Mexico, City.



Lottie Aymar, circa 1890, was among the most talented equestriennes of the late 19th century.

Author's Collection

When John Aymar came from the States to take over the training of the apprentices, Lottie was on hand at every rehearsal and insisted upon trying out the feats with the boys. She rode with greater skill than any of them and ascended the ropes and wires like a dare devil. When Walter entered the tent one morning and saw her dancing gracefully about the ring on a dappled mare, he watched in utter amazement and fascination. He immediately hired a manager for the show and personally took over Lottie's training, devoting his entire time to perfecting her performance.

In August of 1873 Miss Bella, a native South American girl, was adopted by Mrs. Aymar to help Lottie in her acts. Miss Bella would become a first class artist herself. Lottie, on the Great American Circus at San Salvador de Bahia, South America, was the star of the company. She was a charming young lady with expressive countenance, blue eyes, light brown hair, beautiful form and graceful undulating motion on the airy perch.

As Lottie grew older, her graceful form and skillful acting attracted great admiration. Her acts were followed by enthusiastic outbursts of applause and she was showered with beautiful bouquets at every performance. Elegant coaches stood nightly at the entrance to the amphitheater, their occupants waiting to pay homage to "Carlotta, La Reina Del Aire". Both a young Frenchman haberdasher and a wealthy printer were enamored by her charm and sought her hand in marriage. She turned both of them down and chose Harry Wambold (nee Henry J. Jones), the man on the flying trapeze. Harry, born in 1848, was extensively engaged in athletic, aerial and gymnastic enterprises. His early avocation before the circus was photography. He went into the circus because of the success of his older brother, George, in circus life. In 1874 Lottie and Harry were secretly married and, wishing to avoid her parent's objections, they fled to New York. Every circus owner in the United States had heard of Lottie's triumphs in Mexico and it was not difficult for her to obtain work for her-

self and her not too enterprising husband.

Meanwhile Margaret and Walter had lost their zest for adventure and sold the amphitheater in Mexico City. With Lottie's favorite horse, Babe, they returned to the States. Margaret took up residence in a New York apartment while Walter toured with various circuses. In November 1884 he was a rider with the Warner & Henderson circus, but his riding days were about over and therefore he worked mostly as a trainer or equestrian manager.

Aymar's South American Circus Co. in May of 1875, just returned from South America and Mexico, opened for a brief season on May 12th at Bidwell's Academy of Music in New Orleans.

Walter B. Aymar was manager and proprietor and Harry Wambold was treasurer. Harry also performed as a gymnast and was one of eight tumblers. William and Walter Aymar were both listed as riders and Señorita Bella, Lottie's adopted sister, was listed as the principal female rider. The only reference to our subject was Mrs. Harry Wambold listed, along with her mother, as one of the entrée riders.⁹ Lottie was pregnant with her first child, born in October of 1875.

In the summer of 1876, O'Brien's circus included among their equestrian artists a Madame Carlotta and Messrs. Aymar and Wambold.¹⁰ In January of 1877, sixteen



Lottie Aymar posing on horseback with the Sig Sautelle show, 1897.

Author's Collection



Willie Aymar, Lottie's brother, circa 1882.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

months after the birth of their daughter, Lottie and Harry traveled to Brazil with the Howes & Cushing United States Circus. The child died in Para, Brazil on January 21st.¹¹ Lottie contracted yellow fever as did Harry. They eventually came back on a tramp steamer to New York.

In 1877 Mme. Carlotta Wambold was on the Great United States Circus. In an ad she was billed as a "renowned French equestrienne, first season in America."¹² She was engaged by Messrs. Thayer & Noyes to perform a daring and beautiful act of equitation on her Flemish thoroughbreds. Harry Wambold was also on the show as a gymnast. That year Walter Aymar and his son were on Cooper, Bailey & Co. in Australia doing a double carrying act. Master Aymar also did principal equitation. In August of 1878 Carlotta Wambold, principal rider and female gymnast, and Harry Wambold, gymnast and outside ascensionist, were at liber-

ty.¹³ Following the birth of her second daughter, Estella, on the 28th of March, 1879, Lottie went back to work.¹⁴

In January of 1880, Lottie was performing for the Robert Stickney & John H. Murray circus in Boston along with Charles Fish, Jennie Tournour, Emma Stickey as well as Lottie's father and brother, Walter and Willie Aymar.¹⁵ For 1881 Lottie Aymar and Rosina Dubsky were doing good pad riding in the double ring on the Adam Forepaugh Circus. Lottie was billed as "the accomplished equestrienne and performer of wonderful and dangerous aerial evolutions on the lofty trapeze..."¹⁶ The next year Lottie was an equestrienne and trapeze performer on Sells Bros. circus. She was a bright star in the sawdust galaxy doing some very difficult feats on a trotting horse in a brilliant principal act and she was also on the balancing trapeze.¹⁷ Willie Aymar was a youthful equestrian in his principal act.

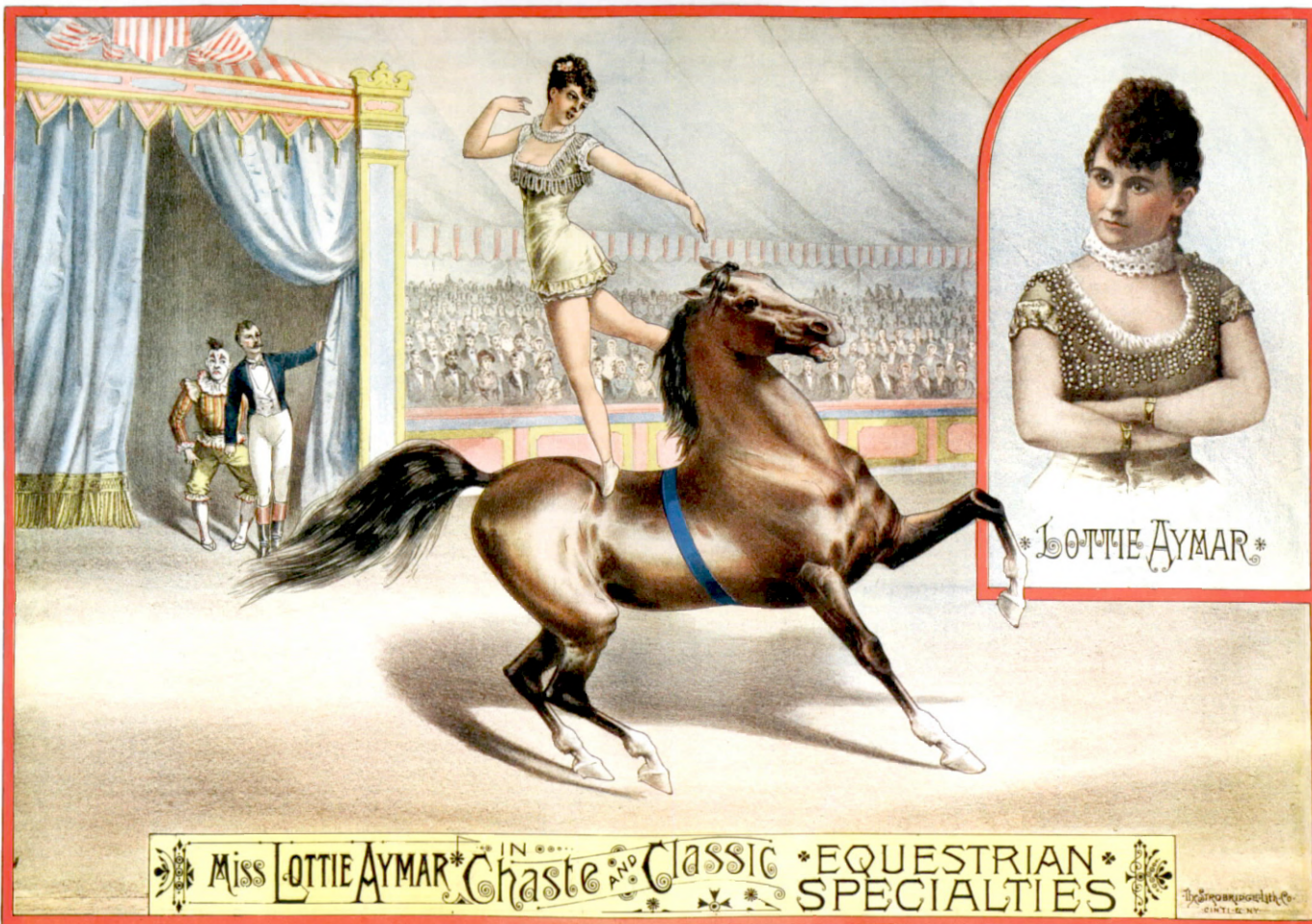
In February of 1882, Lottie was listed among the performers to be seen at the Howard Athenaeum with Stevens' Great Australian Circus. The review described her as "a beautifully formed woman, who performs some risky feats of balancing on the trapeze..."¹⁸ By October of that year she was performing her bareback act as well as her balancing trapeze routine with the Sells Bros. show in Atlanta, Georgia.¹⁹

Walter Aymar established a horse breaking establishment in Fordham, New York in 1882 when he took over S.Q. Stokes' place. Walter began to plan to teach ladies and gentlemen school riding in the practice ring at his barn in 1883. Side saddle riding was taught by Mrs. Aymar. By 1888 he also maintained stable facilities for circus horses. The horses were broken to pad, bareback, trick, or manege. The facility, twenty-five minutes from Grand Central Depot, was also open for persons to board. All rooms in the house were large and comfortable. It was in the finest location for riding and driving. The house, situated in a healthy neighborhood, was between Southern Blvd. and Jerome Ave., three minute walk from either.

Lottie was on the Adam Forepaugh circus in 1883 when she fell during a trapeze performance in Philadelphia on April 21st. According to a short account in the *New York Clipper*, she "was thrown 30 feet to the ground by the breaking of a rope. She was too much stunned to go on with her act, but did not seem to be seriously hurt."²⁰ Although listed in the rosters for performances in May and June of that year, a short line ran in the August 4th *New York Clipper* announcing Lottie Aymar's return to the Forepaugh show on July 28th.²¹

The next year, 1884, Lottie was employed by the New

ADAM FOREPAUGH'S GREAT SHOW, LARGEST IN THE WORLD



MUSEUM, MENAGERIE, TRIPLE CIRCUS & ROMAN HIPPODROME.

This poster was printed by Strobridge Lithographing Co. for Lottie's appearance with Adam Forepaugh's Great Show, circa 1883.

Ringier Museum, Tibbals Collection

York and New England Menagerie, Circus, Museum, Caravan & Hippodrome, Bicycle Riding Association & Double Ring Shows. On an ad for Hays City, May 17th, Lottie was described "In Her \$10,000 Challenge Act, The Queen of All Lady Riders in the World." She was the "Brilliant Beauty and Accomplished Artiste, Universally Acknowledged to be Perfect and Peerless. This magnificent lady is a wonderful horsewoman and will appear at each exhibition in a wondrous act on her bareback steed, performing the most difficult feats with a degree of grace, skill and precision, truly marvelous. Miss Aymar is the most attractive lady in the professional world with the form of perfect symmetry combined with beautiful classic features. She outranks in loveliness the famous Lily of Jersey and the Equestrian Arena claims the same title that the famous English Beau-

ty has." The New York Clipper on August 30th, 1884 announced a balloon ascension on John B. Doris' Great Inter Ocean Circus: "Carlotta is to make a balloon ascension at the Greenfield, O. Fair. She made one at Saratoga Springs, NY Aug. 20 ..." ²²

In a New York Clipper ad for December 3rd, 1884: "Miss Lottie Aymar, Sovereign Princess of the Arena, in an entire new and original act called the Trotting Act. Also her Great Bareback Principal Act with Hurdle Finish. Miss Aymar in conjunction with Mlle Alma in their Great Double Trapeze. Mlle Alma in her specialty of loop walking, head downward. Lottie Aymar, Fordham. N. Y. at liberty".

A review in the January 6, 1885 *Cleveland Leader* describes the sights of Charles W. Fish's champion circus, which included Miss Lottie Aymar with the somewhat

THE BARNUM & BAILEY GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH
ENTIRELY NEW LARGER AND BETTER THAN EVER BEFORE.

P.T. BARNUM
J.A. BAILEY

LOTTIE AYMAR EUROPE'S GREATEST RIDER
 HER FIRST APPEARANCE IN AMERICA
 ENGAGED AT A SALARY OF \$500 A WEEK.
 1ST SUPERB ORIGINAL, BAREBACK PRINCIPAL & JOCKEY ACTS, UPON NAKED STEEDS, ACCOMPANIED BY A CLOUD OF BEAUTIFUL WHITE TRAINED DOVES.
 ACTUALLY LEAPING FROM THE GROUND, CLEAR & CLEAN, OVER THE BACK OF A SWIFT RUNNING HORSE.

DAILY EXPENSES \$6,800. 15 NEW UNITED SHOWS CAPITAL INVESTED \$3,000,000.

Another Strobridge poster, this time showing the equestrienne with Barnum & Bailey, circa 1889.

Ringing Museum, Tibbals Collection

extravagant title of "The Langtry of the Arena," in a very clever act of balancing on the swinging trapeze." The review goes on to mention that "Miss Aymar gave her original pirouette act on a trotting horse, assisted by the great clown, John Foster..."²³ By the summer of that year, she was appearing with John O'Brien's circus.²⁴

In 1886 Lottie Aymar was on the Miller, Okey & Freeman Show doing a principal act. She was hurt at Rochester, New York in a fall. She rejoined the show at Auburn, New York on June 21st. Another report claimed that Lottie Aymar temporarily lost a diamond while walking around the Utica, New York depot on June 26th. After a long search it was found by Mlle Purvis. In September she endeavored to settle a rumor that illness was the only cause of her leaving

Miller, Okey & Freeman. She was now at home recuperating. Others had said that she had left the show to go to another position. She was satisfied with her present position but needed rest for several months. In September Walter received a telegram from Lottie that she would rejoin Miller, Okey & Freeman at Columbus, Ohio on September 20th. Papa Aymar was at the show's ring barn putting some horses through lessons. He was also breaking a manege horse for May Waldon. On November 20th, Lottie was on Orrin Bros. circus in Mexico. By February 26th, 1887 it was announced that Lottie would be with Orrin in Mexico for the entire season. Included in the list of performers were Daisy Belmont, the Elliott Family, Lottie Aymar, the Four Judges (acrobats), Mrs. Lowande, John Worland and wife,



MISS LOTTIE AYMAR.



DOC. AYMAR.

Portraits of Lottie and her husband Doc (Miller) Aymar were included in the Ringling Bros. route book of 1893.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Three Mauvels and Charles Belmont and wife. On September 19th, 1888, after two years with Orrin Bros. in Mexico, Lottie returned to her home in Fordham, New York.²⁵

Early in 1889 word was received of the death of Lottie's brother, Willie Aymar (1865-1888), of intermittent fever. He had died at Kingston, Jamaica on December 29th, 1888. Aymar was on Frank A. Gardner's Circus at the time. He had appeared on P.T. Barnum (1877), Cooper & Jackson (1881), Sells Bros. (1882), and Hilliard & Main (1883).

A surprise birthday party for Lottie was held on January 1st, 1889 at her home in Fordham. Among the many presents were eight imported fan tail pigeons intended to supplement her trotting act planned for the 1889 season. Her father and mother were present. On Barnum & Bailey in 1889 Lottie was one of three bareback equestrians. In display #9 she rode a principal bareback act and in display #12 she had a new Parisian Trotting equestrian act which introduced the flock of trained doves. Lottie Aymar's trotting principal act was much admired for its grace and skill. Rosa Lee and Lottie at Madison Square Garden rode superbly and received hearty approbation at each performance.

"One of the most graceful lady riders in Barnum's Circus yesterday was Miss Lottie Aymar, who did a bareback act in the ring furthest from the entrance into the main tent. Miss Aymar not only attracted attention by her graceful riding, but possessed an added interest for many who saw her on the score of personal acquaintance and because she is claimed as an Elmira girl. Miss Aymar comes naturally by her ability to ride for her father, Walter Aymar, was one of the most famous bareback riders of his time."

On November 28th, 1889 Lottie's husband, Harry Wambold, died at Fordham, New York of a stroke of paralysis. Born in 1848, he had extensively engaged in athletic, aerial and gymnastic enterprises for about twenty-five years. His wife was at the time with Orrin Bros. in Mexico City. He left a daughter, Stella, 12 years of age, who lived with her grandparents. Burial was on Sunday, December 1st in Woodlawn Cemetery, Westchester County, New York.

In October of 1890 Lottie advertised fourteen performing pigeons for sale, suitable for a trotting act.

Presented as the premier equestrienne and performer on the balancing trapeze on Ringling Bros. circus in 1891,

Lottie Aymar was at Ottuma, Iowa when she heard that her father had taken ill. She travelled east on a train with Charles Ringling arriving two hours before Walter's death. He died of pneumonia on June 9th after eight weeks in Baraboo, Wisconsin where he had accompanied his daughter to join Ringling Bros. Circus. He was 59 years old. He began in the 1830's under his brother John P. Aymar, who broke his neck with Baltie's Circus in London, England in 1843. Aymar was apprenticed to Seth B. Howes and rode night after night with the celebrated French rider, La Toste. Walter was one of the best horse breakers in the country and was well known in South America as a proprietor, traveling for years there with his own circus. His was the only circus to cross the Cordillera, a perilous journey. They were almost famished and starved in the desert when Indians befriended them, thinking they were spirits. As the Aymars performed for the Indians, their lives were saved. Walter



JACK COUSINS.

Lottie's final husband, Jack Cousins was also on the 1893 Ringling show.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

was the father of Willie Aymar who died in Jamaica, West Indies. Albert, the youngest brother, was the only surviving brother. Albert was a resident of Chicago and, with Lottie, was at the death bed. The remains were temporarily interred in Baraboo.

Lottie rejoined the Ringling show on June 11th in Faribault, Minnesota. The route book for the 1891 season includes the notice that on July 11th, in Traverse City, Michigan, "Doc Miller and Miss Lottie Aymar were quietly married...."²⁶ Miller, who would be performing as Doc Aymar by 1893, began his career as a balancer who worked atop pyramids of chairs, bottles and tables.

Lottie Aymar returned to her home in Fordham, New York with her mother and daughter. She was slowly recovering from a dislocated knee caused by a fall from her horse while with Ringling Bros. She had recently invested in some real estate for her daughter, Stella, at Lindenhurst, Long Island. In November of 1891 Lottie's principal horse, Babe, was killed in an accident in Jersey City. On May 5th, 1947 Mrs. Edith Ringling said; "Up to this time we have not had a more beautiful principal act on our show."

In spite of the fact that Lottie had stated that she would not travel in 1892 and had refused a number of good offers, there is a reference that she was an equestrienne on the Sig Sautelle circus that year.

In 1893 Lottie Aymar again performed on the balancing trapeze for Ringling Bros. circus and was the instrumentalist on the Bells of Moscow parade wagon. She and her husband, Doc Miller also performed an aerial act.

For a third year in 1894 Lottie was on Ringling Bros. circus on the trapeze and as a hurdle rider. She gave a thrilling display of balancing on the frail trapeze bar in the dome of the canvas over the center ring. This was a sensational, pleasing and refined novelty act which lasted for ten minutes. Lottie Aymar and Josie Ashton performed some wonderful equestrianism in their principal acts interspersed with funny clowning by Lew Sunlin, Jules Turnour, Albert Gaston and others. After closing the regular season at St. Louis, Lottie went to Cleveland for two weeks.

Beginning in 1895 Lottie was for two weeks at Hall's Casino in Chicago. The Great Wallace circus signed her for the regular 1895 season as a principal rider. She was billed as "the foremost equestrienne of America." In her performance she evidenced that systematic pattern characteristic of the Aymar family. She had grown up as a star equestrienne on Barnum, Adam Forepaugh, Orrin Bros. and other circuses.

The next year Lottie was an equestrienne on Frank A.

Robbins circus. In December she sailed for Central America with the Donovan show. Later in the year of 1897 she and her husband, Jack Cousins, were on the Sig Sautelle circus, performing with John B. Doris' Winter circus in New York, during the winter season which opened November 22, 1897.²⁷ Still with the Sautelle show in 1899, Lottie was noted for her trapeze balancing.²⁸

By May of 1901, Lottie and her husband were headlining Hargreaves Big Show.²⁹ On November 2nd, 1901 Jack Cousins and his wife, Lottie, closed two weeks at the Corn Carnival at Peoria, Illinois where they were featured in a riding act. They were with Manager J. W. Gorman's Indoor Circus for 1 week each at Portland, Maine (Nov. 11th) and at Bangor, Maine (Nov. 18th) in 1901. For the main portion of the season Jack Cousins and his wife were with Hargreaves circus.

At the beginning of 1902 Jack Cousins, a bareback rider, was in jail. Later he was released from jail and exonerated from the charge of larceny of two horses. The trouble was due to a dispute with Hargreaves as to the keeping of the horses over the previous winter.

Jack Cousins visited Welsh Bros. circus on September 8th, 1902 and was welcomed by all the personnel and by his wife. At this time Lottie was driving a cake walking horse and doing a catchy manege act. Lottie completed a successful season with Welsh Bros. and she and her husband contracted as riders for the 1903 season with Welsh Bros. Jack Cousins and Lottie were with the C.A. Phinney Shows in 1904.

The Welsh Bros. Newest Great Shows for 1905 had Mr. and Mrs. Jack Cousins as equestrians. Mrs. Cousins presented a unique carriage manege act containing two beautiful Arabian horses and six fox hounds. For the third year Jack was the equestrian director. The next year found Lottie on Frank A. Robins Circus as an equestrienne. She retired as a performer in 1908.


Lottie traveled with the Hammerstein show as a wardrobe mistress until she was seventy and shared with Oscar Hammerstein in his Broadway successes. She was called "mother" by everyone who knew her. In 1911 she had a pleasant visit with Rosina Dubskey Coley, a circus rider.

At the time of World War I, Jack Cousins, old time equestrian director and bareback rider, was in the veterinary department of the army.

Lottie died on February 20, 1949 at the age of 92 at the home of her granddaughter, Mrs. Forrest E. Wyson at 148 S. Westgate Ave., West Los Angeles, California.³⁰ Interment was in Woodlawn Cemetery. **Bw**

Endnotes

1. *New York Clipper*, November 30, 1861, 263.
2. *New York Clipper*, May 19, 1860, 38.
3. *New York Clipper*, December 15, 1861, 279.
4. Ibid.
5. *New York Clipper*, November 30, 1861, 263.
6. *New York Clipper*, November 8, 1862, 239.
7. Ibid.
8. *Daily Alta California*, August 25, 1861, 4.
9. "Circuses," *New York Clipper*, May 29, 1875, 71.
10. "Circus Coming - Twenty-Five Cents Admission," *The Tiffin Tribune* (Tiffin, OH), July 27, 1876.
11. "Circuses," *New York Clipper*, March 17, 1877, 407.
12. *The Somerset Herald* (Somerset, PA), May 23, 1877, 2.
13. *New York Clipper*, August 24, 1878, 171.
14. California Death Index, Estelle Stanhope (1879 - 1941).
15. "Circuses" *New York Clipper*, January 17, 1880, 339.
16. *Evening Star* (Washington, DC) April 2, 1881, 8.
17. "The Circus," *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL,) May 30, 1882, 8.
18. "Howard Athenaeum - Stevens' Great Australian Circus," *Boston Herald* (Boston, MA), February 28, 1882.
19. "Sells Circus and Menagerie," *Atlanta Journal Constitution* (Atlanta, GA), October 24, 1882.
20. "Circuses," *New York Clipper*, April 28, 1883, 94.
21. "Circuses," *New York Clipper*, August 4, 1883, 323.
22. "Circuses," *New York Clipper*, August 30, 1884.
23. "The People's Theater" *Cleveland Leader* (Cleveland, OH), January 6, 1885, 3.
24. "The Big Circus," *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), August 25, 1885, 3.
25. New York Passenger list for the Saratoga, September 19, 1888
26. Ringling Brothers Official Route Book, 1891, p. 34.
27. "Winter Circus Opens Tonight," *New York Tribune* (New York, NY), November 22, 1897, 7.
28. *New York Clipper*, August 5, 1899, 448.
29. *Bridgeton Evening News* (Bridgeton, NJ), May 8, 1901, 1.
30. "Carlotta, Aerialist Queen for Many Years, Dies at 92," *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), February 23, 1949, 14.



Ladies Dressing Tent on the
1898 Ringling show. Minnie
Fisher is seen at far left, looking
at a canvas.

Illinois State University Special
Collections, Milner Library

Ladies Dressing Room
Ringling Bros. Circus 1898



The Intrepid Acts and Remarkable Life of
Miss Minnie Fisher

by Maureen Brunsdale

If a 1923 Grotto Circus press piece is to be believed, Minnie Fisher was a girl who defied death daily with her aerial performances that were to be rewarded only by applause. She was also a performer born in a circus train to the Flying Fishers, performers so skilled and sought after they named their own salaries. Her private school education included three years at a finishing school situated on the banks of the Hudson. She started performing, the article continues, at twelve years of age after "a death in the family made her independent of circus owners and their payrolls." It states the first thing she did after that was to host a banquet for the workingmen. Then she endowed a private orphans' home on New York's east side to provide for children whose circus performing parents died in poverty. With these worthy causes addressed, Minnie purchased a gold-filled cable for her act, had her rigging studded with precious gems and bought herself a private rail car so as not to miss a single performance. The article concludes with, "Verily, this is one girl that works because she loves to."¹

Verily, Minnie spent a lifetime working. But little else in that article holds true. When it appeared in print, she was fifty-five years old – hardly a girl. So, who was Minnie Fisher? She was born in the South, where she began performing in show business. Throughout her career, she signed up with and/or worked on seventeen different circuses, performed in hundreds of different vaudeville houses, and entertained crowds in nearly every state, many of the Caribbean and South American countries, and perhaps Europe. Her act varied from single trapeze, to iron jaw, to snake handling, to equestrienne performances and races, to butterfly dances, and slides for life. She broke innumerable bones in her body but her spirit remained undamaged. She married five times and died at the relatively advanced age of 83 in Los Angeles. These few sentences merely scratch the surface of her life experiences in the ring and beyond it. Closer study reveals a woman who could never afford endowments nor gem-studded rigging. Instead, her riches resided in her resilience and character.

Minnie Estelle Averette² was born near Selma, Alabama on the last day of March, 1868 to a landowning farmer and his wife, Benjamin and Susannah. Minnie was the third of five children this union produced, all but one were daughters. She spent her early life like so many of her class – at home until she was old enough for school. During the first decade of her life, she moved with her parents from Selma to Browns, twenty miles to the west. Another move, this one just over 200 miles to the east happened when

she was about fifteen, situating her in Atlanta, where her father's extended family lived. Her hometown newspaper reported that "no one could make a deeper or more lasting impression upon a susceptible heart" than Minnie, in part because "she was a lively, vivacious and fluent talker." She was further described as "decidedly handsome and well educated... about five feet high ... [with] a beautiful, round face, with even features. Her eyes were blue, and when she was talking they fairly danced. A mass of golden hair, tastefully coiled upon the back of her head, gave her a naïve appearance for one so young."³

This information was published after Minnie joined half a dozen teenagers who went to see Shields and Shields' Ten-cent Circus in Atlanta in the last week of February, 1886. Their tent was set up at the corner of Hunt and Lloyd Streets, one block from Minnie's grandmother's house. The touted star aerialist for the Shields' show was George Patterson, a twenty-four year-old athlete whose gift for throwing double somersaults between swinging trapezes was well documented. Minnie saw in Patterson a man in fine physical condition, one who displayed a confident fearlessness while somersaulting between two horizontal bars. Patterson, meanwhile, saw a young lady who was "one of Atlanta's 'prettiest and most captivating seventeen year-old girls.'"⁴ In fact, it's reported that they shared a single, very meaningful glance during the show "but in that glance, each knew that love was there."⁵ Patterson managed to get her attention once again before she left the tent and matched that glance with an equally endearing and heart-warming smile. Of course being seventeen, Minnie found a way to see the show – and Patterson – in the days that followed. They shared more than meaningful glances. In fact, they hatched an elopement plan.

A week after first seeing Patterson, Minnie left the house informing her parents that she was going to a matinee entertainment featuring character song and dance actress, Flora Moore. While she didn't return in a timely fashion afterwards, her parents were not concerned because they assumed the teenager had gone to spend the night at her grandmother's house as she had so often done. In reality, Minnie found her way 120 miles to the north and west to Chattanooga, where the Shields' circus was next showing.

When her parents realized Minnie was not with her grandmother, they alerted the police. In his investigation, Atlanta's police chief overheard conversation about Minnie and Patterson which led him to send a telegram to the Chattanooga police. The reply confirmed Minnie's presence in that city and so Susannah went there immediately.



She found Minnie at a hotel known as Cameron House, and after embracing her daughter, Minnie reportedly said, "Mama, my husband, Mr. Patterson." The matrimonial details unfurled this way: after arriving in Chattanooga, Minnie made her way to the Shields' show and accompanied Patterson back to Cameron House where Rev. J.W. Beckman was summoned. He performed the marriage ceremony on March 11, 1886, just two weeks after their eyes first met.

Subterfuge was employed with the pastor before the wedding and with her mother afterwards. The reverend had been informed that Minnie and Patterson's love grew out of the friendship they developed as childhood friends in his hometown of Bay City, Michigan and Patterson assured Susannah that he would send her daughter there soon. It's possible that he tried to do that. But if nothing else has been learned about Minnie, it is that she was independently-minded and stubborn. The next season, 1887, she performed alongside her husband for the Shields and Shields' Ten-Cent Circus for about a month as it toured throughout the south, starting with it in Chattanooga. Given her inexperience with entertaining the public, it is unlikely that Patterson's pay increased from the \$25 each week he had been earning the previous season with his trapeze and horizontal bar act, *The Patterson Brothers*.⁶

Patterson taught his new bride tricks she could use on the trapeze to entertain an audience⁷ and throughout the late 1880s she and *The Patterson Brothers* performed for the Shields and Shields' circus and in vaudeville, and in 1890 she signed with A. H. Fulford & Co's *New London Show*.⁸ Curiously, she was also booked for benefit and stage performances throughout this time – without Patterson or his brothers.

An early portrait of Minnie, circa 1892.

Circus World Museum



Minnie Fisher, Ann Conners, and Jess Leon preparing for an equestrian display, circa 1897.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

The Patterson Brothers, again with Minnie, toured through Texas in 1890 with Col. G.W. Hall and Sam McFlinn's New York Circus (not the Fulford & Co New London Show as was reported in February that year).⁹ By 1891, they all were with Walter L. Main's New Monster R.R. Shows, Double Circus, Roman Hippodrome, Elevated Stage, Menagerie, Museum, Aquarium and Free Horse Show.¹⁰

There wasn't much of a hiatus from performing for the up-and-coming circus star in 1891. In October, she joined Frank A. Gardner's Circus in the Caribbean and South America where she was hailed as an aerialist who made "the Spaniards stand up with her single trapeze" and amazed them with hair slides.¹¹ Traveling between Puerto Rico and Venezuela became a hair-raising event for the personnel of Gardner's Circus when the ship they were sailing got caught in a storm. The wicked winds stripped the sails from the masts and left the boat drifting for 48 hours without food and water until it finally landed in La Guaria, Venezuela. Undaunted, Gardner's circus went on to visit

Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile, traveling over the Andes Mountains and traversing the corpse-strewn saltpeter district along the way.¹²

Throughout this time Minnie's circus performance skills diversified. Late in 1892, the title of "queen of the reptiles" was added to her billing. She stayed with Gardner's Circus through the majority of 1893, touring through Jamaica among other exotic and tropical locales while her husband's act performed in the United States for shows like the short-lived Wells & Blackburn's Circus.¹³

Professionally, Minnie's life was blooming while her marriage with Patterson seemed to be withering. Indeed, she and Patterson were not booked together again after 1891. Divorce records and/or newspaper notices of such have not been found, but it is assumed the bonds of marriage were broken by mid-1897, if not before. Ironically, *The Atlanta Constitution* reported Patterson's return to their city in May of that year, reminding readers of the whirlwind romance he inspired eleven years earlier, noted his role in starting

his wife's trajectory in the sawdust ring, and pointed to her place with Ringling Brothers.¹⁴ Meanwhile, George and his brother had a short time of liberty so they were booked at the Grand Theater there.

Minnie was 26 years old when she signed up again with Walter L. Main's Shows for its 1894 season. That circus was to begin its tour in Ohio in April, but Minnie left it before its season even began. Instead, she was in South America with John Nelson's Anglo-American Circus in May.¹⁵ Sixteen years later, Minnie recalled that when this show got to Bogota, it folded because of the failure of the coffee crop. She told how she made the decision to buy the show, but business never improved so she lost the money she had invested into it. To pay the performers' back salaries, she sold her diamonds for \$1600, keeping \$50 of that to help make the four-day journey to Cartagena, the principal seaport. Arriving there nearly penniless, she somehow secured a job performing the slide for life act on Sundays for \$250 per slide. She spent three months in Cartagena before deciding to sail for New York.¹⁶ The evidence contradicts at least the show-owning part of this recollection, but Minnie did spend time in Cartagena and she did board a ship ultimately bound for New York. On the way there the ship stopped in Santiago, Cuba and Minnie stopped with it, deciding to join first Donovan's circus and then Tony Lowande's circus.¹⁷ She stayed in Cuba until the first month of 1896, when she returned to the States, "[I] landed in New York on an extremely cold January day, clad in a flimsy summer dress and white leghorn hat."¹⁸

The 1896 edition of the Walter L. Main circus had Minnie Patterson with it.¹⁹ She undoubtedly found some contentment and a good deal of comradery in another aerial act that had signed with this show, the Fisher Brothers based out of Bloomington, Illinois. At this time the Fishers, a well-documented trapeze act, consisted of Fred Mil-timore, Henry Franz, and Charles Noble. Fred and Charles often used Fisher as their surnames. The press took notice of all of the aerialists, including possibly Minnie: "There is none so absolutely thrilling as the aerial act of the Fisher brothers and the dancing lady aerialist, who performs with them. . . Their act of that peculiar nature, which simply beggars description, and defies language to do it justice, head down dives, and headlong swift pirouettes and somersaults high in the air away above the heads of the audience. Leaps with bird-like agility from high perch to perch and from swinging diminutive bar to bar. Wheel flights and passages like winged denizens of the upper ether with sure hand and foot and eye; coming, going, returning, darting, leaping,

tumbling, vanishing and appearing, wonderfully agile active, intrepid, graceful, blood curdling, phenomenal aerial performances."²⁰

The next year they – The Fisher Brothers and Minnie Patterson – all booked with Shipp's Midwinter Circus.²¹ This was the last time Minnie used the Patterson name professionally because she and Charles Noble wed sometime in 1897. From this point forward, Minnie became known as both Minnie Noble and Minnie Fisher. It was the latter name which stuck with her for decades.

Minnie and the Fishers were with the Ringling Brothers circus from 1897 to 1901. In that time, Minnie continued to be billed as a trapezist but added "the human top" and "the aerial top." A description of her act provides an explanation for her new sobriquet: "After swinging chairs about by her teeth and hanging by the same means for some minutes at the top of the tent, she was given a smart whirl and sent spinning through the air like a Kansas cyclone. Her teeth were her only hold."²² Minnie's addition of an iron jaw performance to her entertainment arsenal didn't come easily for her. The local Bloomington newspaper, *The Pantagraph*, reported one particularly bad fall that Minnie experienced while practicing with the apparatus in the abandoned Lake Erie & Western Roundhouse: "She fell a distance of fifteen feet, striking on both heels, and receiving a fearful jar of the entire system. She was taken home on a stretcher and will be laid up some time."²³

To expand her repertoire of skills, she worked on her equestrian abilities, becoming proficient enough to be a part of a ménage act on the princely spotted Arabian stallion named Sultan and later a star equestrienne on her horse, Jupiter. Her excellent horsemanship compelled the Ringling publicity machine to herald her as someone different than their top-notch aerialist, Minnie Fisher; while presenting with a horse she became known as Madame Noble. "Madame Noble, whose wonderful exploits on her great steed prancing in perpendicular poses, leaping high in the air and diving and plunging like a storm-tossed boat at sea, and apparently trying to shipwreck his mistress, seems by magic to retain the guidance of her furiously leaping mount."²⁴

Throughout this period, Charles and Minnie took care of each other. While presenting in Wellington, Kansas in late September, 1897, Charles fell ill with typhoid fever. Minnie stayed to care for him until his mother could be summoned to bring him back to Bloomington in mid-October. This signaled the end of the season for him while Minnie finished out the season with The Fishers. At the



THE GREAT FISHER FAMILY.
High-Class Aerial Artists.

Members of the Fisher Family of aerial artists as pictured in the 1898 Ringling route book.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

end of the next season with Ringling, Minnie and Charles traveled to Sylacauga, Alabama to visit her family for two weeks,²⁵ perhaps for the wedding of her father to her step-mother, Loyola. In March, 1899 Charles was called to Chicago by telegram to be at the side of his seriously ill wife.²⁶ They seemed strongly inseparable, at least in the press.

Like so many performers, Minnie was driven to exceed expectations. When doing her aerial work, it was no longer enough for her to spin like a whirling dervish high above the audience. So "while holding to a wire in this manner [by her teeth] she was hoisted to the roof of the tent and back. Before the crowd was given a chance to do much wondering over this performance she had taken a trapeze between her teeth and was again hoisted, this time with an acrobat performing upon the bar [beneath her]."²⁷ She was well regarded among her fellow troupers too. Elected or chosen to serve as the treasurer of the Ringlings' Ladies' Club, she was rewarded for her work with a dressing case "which contained a complete set of toilet articles, each trimmed with

In the September 14, 1907 issue of the New York Clipper, the following letter from Minnie Fisher appeared, sharing her knowledge of the beginnings of the iron jaw acts.

To the Editor of the New York Clipper:

There seems to be an idea existing that the difficult and beautiful acts, known as the iron jaw, aerial tops, human butterflies, the swivel in midair, where the 'strip' takes place, and all improvements pertaining to same, originated only four or five years ago. I would like to give a few facts concerning these acts for the sake of the originators.

Millie De Granville, with her advanced ideas, paved a way for those who might care to follow in after years in the 'iron jaw,' and in continuing to name the originators I will bring to the minds of performers of days gone by, Mrs. Sarah Irwin, whom we were proud to recognize as the first woman who ever did the 'swivel,' or 'human top' act, which was daring and dangerous, but made beautiful and fascinating by her grace.

Just at the same time when she had accomplished so much and had made her mark as a star performer, misfortune befell her, though Mrs. Irwin felt that her efforts after all, had not been futile, when she gained my consent to take up the act she had lost through misfortune and accident. Feeling the importance of so beautiful and difficult an act, I did not throw away any of the advantages offered me, and began my career. I was featured with the Ringling Bros. Circus, which was touring California in 1898, and during that time I originated and introduced that part of the 'aerial top,' or 'swivel' act, known as the 'strip,' making my appearance in mid-air, suspended by my teeth, and creating a sensation by stripping from an evening dress to the conventional tights.

I will now mention Inez Palmer, to whom the credit is due for originating the beautiful serpentine dance, while hanging by her teeth in midair. Miss Palmer was featured with the Wallace Bros. Show in 1898.

Two others prominent in this line are the popular Tybell Sisters, who have in recent years introduced many new and novel features connected with the acts in question.

silver and gold, from the ladies dressing room in appreciation of her labors.”²⁸

“Minnie Fisher and Brother” performed in 1902 for the Walter L. Main Fashion Plate Shows. Though there is no indication of who that ‘brother’ may be, there was an unrelated Fisher, William, who was with this show for at least part of the season.²⁹ Minnie disappeared from all the trade publications in 1903 and remained hidden for the next two years except for a small notice of her father’s death, November 17, 1903, which appeared in the *Clipper*.³⁰ During this time was she in seclusion to care for herself, a child, or was she trying to save her marriage? With no reports of her in these years, the answer is unknown.

At an age, 38, when many female performers of the time had long-since retired, Minnie still worked to entertain for fairs, parks and vaudeville reviews. For Olive Swan’s New York Equestrienne Combination in 1906, “Miss Minnie Fisher, in full evening costume [made] her Slide for Life by her teeth from the top of a 100-foot pole to the center of the park – ½ of a mile slide, using 650 feet of wire – a distance never attempted or accomplished by any living person.”³¹ *Billboard* also reported that she had been successful the past season in “Europe, France, and Italy” though this claim cannot be substantiated by other sources.

Regardless of her travels, Minnie was busy in 1907 – performing, finding another man, and marrying again. On April 19, Minnie Estelle Averette of Lake Charles, Louisiana married Little Falls, New York native Isaac Schermer in Washington, D.C. Schermer was a band leader for Stetson’s Uncle Tom Cabin shows and also served as a publicist for Minnie in 1909. He wrote the *Clipper* then, informing readers that his wife was a member of the short-lived La Frere Sisters doing an iron jaw butterfly act in 1907. He also confirmed to readers that Minnie had been seriously injured while performing in 1908.

That year – 1908 – was one she likely felt in her bones for the rest of her life. It started with the death of her second husband, Charles Noble, in January. The fact that she was not mentioned in his obituary could point to any number of things including possibly a contentious dissolution of marriage. Regardless, five months later she returned to the United States from Mexico with two others who listed their occupations as “theatrical:” her sister, Dora Evriett (sic) and musician (and future vaudeville booking agent), Lew Seeker. That autumn she was booked to race a horse as part of the Malone (New York) Fair. On September 16, Minnie was riding “Merry Widow,” a horse owned by not-



MINNIE FISHER, TRAPEZIST.

A portrait from the 1897 Ringling route book.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

ed strike-breaker James Farley³² who was racing her in his sulky. “Miss Fisher was going through her ring act, when her mount suddenly bolted for the gate. In order to prevent the horse from crashing into the audience the plucky rider drove the horse against the fence”³³ with such violence that it was initially feared she would not survive the impact. It was Farley who helped defray what must have been massive medical expenses for a body largely broken. Her right shoulder, collar bone, and her leg just below the hip were badly broken. She suffered compound fractures in her right arm.³⁴ Minnie’s two sisters attended her constantly after the accident³⁵ and presumably, they were with her as she was later loaded onto a cot that was put on a train headed for her home in Lake Charles, Louisiana. News of the treatment for her accident made headlines throughout the United States. Little wonder because Minnie was encased in a plaster cast covering all of her body except her neck and head. That cast remained for three months, its purpose was to set bones that had previously undergone operations

that were not entirely successful. Presumably after being freed from the cast's confines, 40 year-old Minnie needed to rehabilitate herself to not only everyday-type activities but to circus ones, too.

Instead of performing in 1909, it is believed that she spent much of that year trying to rebuild her body, spirit and cashbook. Towards the last goal (and under the guidance of her attorney), in November she filed a suit against the Franklin County Agricultural Society asking for \$25,000 to offset damages and injuries sustained in the previous year's accident.³⁶ She lost the case that year, appealed the next year, and lost again.³⁷

By the time of her appeal, Minnie came back to perform her slide for life and butterfly acts for vaudeville, park and fair dates. Her act continued to evolve because it had to. Her right arm was "so tender and at times so painful that it has to be kept done up in bandages. The arm is scarred near the wrist, where a dislocated bone protrudes beneath the skin so as to form a large and ugly bunch. Another bone of the same arm is wired together."³⁸ She had lost mobility and dexterity throughout her body, so now she coupled her iron jaw act with an act she had developed years ago "creating a sensation by stripping from an evening dress to the conventional [body] tights."³⁹ It was an act not reviewed favorably by *Variety*.⁴⁰

As if the poor reviews weren't enough, accidents now haunted Minnie. "Aerial Artist is Unfortunate" was the headline of an article detailing two accidents she had during her August 23, 1911 performance at the Chautauqua Fair of Dunkirk, New York. This report spelled out her misfortunes in gruesome detail: "After finishing her first acts on the top of the low building beside the judge's stand, she prepared to descend into the building by way of a trap door in the roof. She missed her footing on the top step and went plunging headfirst to the bottom. She was slightly bruised and badly jarred. A few minutes later she performed her crowning act, shooting down a slanting wire from a height of forty or fifty feet and hanging by her teeth to a strap. Two male assistants were to have brought her to a stop near the bottom by blocking her with a strip of canvas. When her rapidly moving body struck the canvas, one man lost his hold and the young woman plunged against a heavy wooden frame to which the lower end of the wire was attached. Her face struck against the frame. To cap the climax the frame fell and struck her."⁴¹ Understandably, she became hysterical and fainted – but only after she got back to her dressing room.

Once again it seemed like Minnie took little time off to



A portrait of Fisher, circa 1898.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

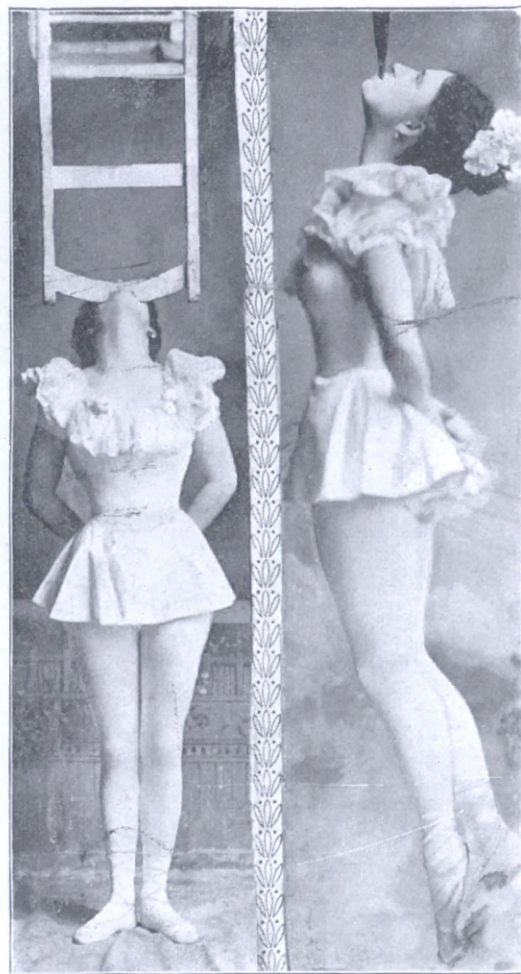
heal. From September, 1911 to late 1912, she was booked at fairs and in vaudeville. A short time later, in 1913, her third husband, Isaac Schermer moved to Danville, Illinois to be the municipal band leader. He did so alone. Soon after, in 1914, Minnie was affiliated with Kit Carson's Buffalo Ranch Big Three Ring Wild West Circus where she met her fourth husband, Hugh McCullough. Hugh had initially served as a steward but by this time was in charge of the Carson cookhouse, serving as superintendent of the commissary department. While Hugh made sure the show folk were fed, Minnie awed audiences with her iron jaw butterfly performance.

"The Original Minnie Fisher" and McCullough joined up with John Robinson's Ten Big Shows in 1916, she as "the original human butterfly" and he as the 24-hour agent. The next year, the Greensburg, Indiana press excelled at creating a compelling backstory for the forty-nine year-old aerialist when this circus came to town. The opening sentence rings with the strong patriotism evident in many newspa-



Performing as Madame Noble, Minnie Fisher was a featured equestrian with Ringling in 1900.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



MISS MINNIE FISHER, *The Aerial Human Top*.

The 1898 Ringling route book included a portrait of Minnie Fisher as well as an image of her performing.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

per reports during that time and gave Minnie an education she never attained. "The world famed John Robinson circus has one lady whose heart beats with patriotism and who is ever mindful of her country and her country's flag, and her name is Miss Minnie Fisher, formerly a professional trained nurse, now a star aerial performer with that great show."⁴² The article credited Minnie with organizing the John Robinson branch of the Red Cross, listed the other female members of the club and thanked Minnie "for the substantial sum she has collected for the cause she so dearly loves." It also commended the men of the show for being "not far behind" in their efforts and ended the piece with "Hats off to the good ladies, and gentlemen as well, of the great John Robinson's Ten Big Shows. They're all right." Such a piece undoubtedly helped bolster not only good feelings towards the performers but played on readers' sense of patriotism

to boost attendance of this show during World War I.

Between her second and third seasons with John Robinson's Circus, Minnie went south once more, this time to Cuba performing with both the Santos and the Artigas circuses there. A letter from her is printed in *Billboard*: "The Loretas and I are with the No. 1 show, managed by Mr. Artigas. No. 2 is managed by Mr. Santos, assisted by Frank Longbottom. The Hanneford Family of riders are one of the many acts from the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, not forgetting Mr. and Mrs. George Loret and myself, from the John Robinson Show. This show closed its season in Havana, January 6 (1918). We have been on the road three weeks, traveling in twenty cars, and the American performers are allowed the privilege of keeping house in our staterooms, as most of us don't like the Cuban cooking..."⁴³

Just over a month later *Billboard* reported that Minnie had come back to Beaumont, Texas but was considering a return to Cuba the next winter with a three girl revolving act as well as her single act and slide for life.⁴⁴ Her 1918 return passage documentation to New Orleans provided a different town of her birth, Fazelville [sic], Alabama, and the date of her birth was recorded as, March 31st, 1869. Most notably, she traveled under the name of Minnie E. McCullough. Noted in careful script above her birthdate on the ship's manifest are the words "Hugh McCullough (husband)." This is the first piece of evidence found that documents her fourth marriage.

Minnie helped the small two-car W.P. Campbell Circus open in 1918, but spent the bulk of the season with John Robinson performing in her aerial acts. At the end of her time with the show, again, she went to the islands. This time, she was with Circo Azul which started its tour in the interior of Cuba before hitting the coastal municipalities. As a "single" performer, Minnie bunked with the much younger Tiny Kline during her time on the island. Said Kline, "No, I didn't know her, but that mattered little. She was the most congenial person I ever met. She looked older than her years but was oh, so young in spirit. That season was all the more pleasant because of Minnie. Having been there before, she... always knew where to go and what to see."⁴⁵

In 1919, at the age of 51, Minnie performed vaudeville dates with the Fanchon Marco Review at places like the Casino in San Francisco.⁴⁶ The *Clipper* reported that she fulfilled this engagement despite a recent injury where she "smashed three ribs" under her left shoulder in a fall suffered while doing her strong jaw act in Vallejo, California.⁴⁷ This injury hospitalized her for three weeks.⁴⁸ She also worked for a time near the end of the season with the John Robinson shows where "despite her 31 years' experience, and her many accidents, [she] still commands attention over middle stage with her iron-jaw offering, and is specially announced in her sensational slide by her teeth."⁴⁹ Her performances, particularly her slide, were still thrilling for audiences to see. A Topeka reporter proclaimed it enough to "raise the goose pimples on a horned toad's back."⁵⁰

The relationship between Minnie and the John Robinson Show was severed in 1920. To let her friends know why she left, she asked *Billboard* to publish the following: "I did not leave the show suddenly, as stated in a recent issue of *The Billboard*. I had been trying to leave for a few weeks. On June 27, at Aberdeen, South Dakota, I took my baggage and departed. I had no trouble whatever with the manage-

ment of the show, and can but speak in the highest terms of Mr. Mugivan. But I was living a life of suspense. Last season and this year I had two vulcanized mouth straps taken from my trunk and destroyed, and on each occasion it cost me over \$60 to replace them. I realized from that and other things that had been done to me in the past two seasons, I had best get away, so I gave in a notice to leave, which was refused. I felt that under the existing circumstances I could not stay. My booking agent placed me at two celebrations, July 3 and 5 at Ponca City and Geary, Oklahoma, respectively, which I worked on my way South. I am at my home in Beaumont, Texas, enjoying a much-needed rest. I also want to state that "Yellow" the property man is not working for me. I gave him expense money at Geary, Oklahoma, and he went to St. Louis."⁵¹

While Minnie was professionally separating from John Robinson, she was also separating from Hugh McCullough personally. Minnie was listed as married in the 1920 census but tellingly Hugh's name is absent from the list of household members. At the time Minnie lived in Beaumont, Texas with her sister, Dora McCall, and niece, Dora McCandless at 565 Doucette Street. McCandless had a husband and two children living with her: William, Christine, and Willie. A close friend of Christine's was Mildred Ella Didricksen, later known to the world as Olympic athlete-turned-professional golfer, Babe Didrikson Zaharias. Her biography provides further insight into the character of Minnie:

"Right across the street from us lived this woman who had been a circus performer. Her name was Aunt Minnie. She did an aerial act where she'd hang by her teeth at the top of the tent, and they'd spin her around. And she did this 250-foot slide, still holding by the teeth, and they caught her down below. She was the aunt of our friend Christine McCandless... When the circus came to town Aunt Minnie would take the whole bunch of us and show us everything. Then we'd come back home and try to do the acrobatics ourselves. We'd put on union suits, like circus tights. I remember one year we hung a whole series of trapezes in a Chinaberry tree Momma had planted in our back yard. We had one swing after another. We killed that tree, and it's a wonder we didn't kill ourselves, because we fell on our heads and everything."⁵²

THE CIRCUS ANNUAL, 1901



LEADING

ARTISTES



RINGLING BROS. WORLD'S GREATEST SHOWS



THESE are lady women with Ringling Bros.' Shows. Each is mistress of the art which gives distinction to physical culture. In nature the physically perfect body is one that comes from the sun, rain, and wind. The sun is really, give them an advantage of health, which leads to a more perfect as well as physical type. The grace of form and coloring of beauty which are hard to find with correct training are to be found in the well-trained women in these three categories. Intelligence of the body and perfect beauty of the body are not the same. The body of beauty is naturally refined by the woman who achieves success in the work. The mind of beauty is refined by the woman who achieves success in the work. The mind of beauty is refined by the woman who achieves success in the work. The mind of beauty is refined by the woman who achieves success in the work.

great and better as well as artistic skill and during its countless single reading, and for the first time of modern days. A. The national order, such a national influence for health, well being, and for the first time of modern days. The national order of this kind could be maintained from the physical form given at some of these who give health and happiness to the performers of Ringling Bros.' Shows. The women who achieve success in the work. The mind of beauty is refined by the woman who achieves success in the work. The mind of beauty is refined by the woman who achieves success in the work. The mind of beauty is refined by the woman who achieves success in the work.



Minnie Fisher (near upper right) was among the featured female performers of the 1901 Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

A year into the roaring twenties Minnie, now 53, started performing with the Sells-Floto Circus as an aerialist. She was on the bill with such notables as Poodles Hanneford, Berta Beeson, Victoria Codona, the Flying Codonas, the Wards, the Nelsons, and the Hodgins, among others. On November 30, 1921 Minnie wed her fifth husband Charles M. Thomas in Harris County, Texas.

This new personal union was matched by a new professional one; 1922 marked the first year Minnie worked for Bob Morton. She did so for three years, working Grotto and Shrine shows doing her slide for life and iron jaw acts. In this time, Minnie suffered a few more falls, including one in Kentucky that hospitalized her for three months. Afterwards when asked how much longer she expected to continue performing, she responded "rather jokingly: 'Yes, I have been injured many times and am 'sporting' broken bones in many places of my anatomy, but – well, I guess I'll just keep at it.'" ⁵³ A few weeks after giving this statement, she fell again from near the top of a tent. This time she rebroke her right leg and right arm, suffered several bruises and lacerations. Remarkably, instead of quitting she did as she always did – took a little time to heal and then got back out there to please the public.

Minnie, presumably with Thomas, moved to California in 1925 and retired. A *Vaudeville News* article drew attention to her situation two years later. "Minnie Fisher (Mrs. Thomas) lives in a pretty little house out some distance from Los Angeles. I was called upon to visit her today, as she suffered a very severe accident a few years ago and which incapacitates her for her regular work... This brave little woman has been making her living selling artificial flowers, etc., and in that way has been able to save her little home, acquired when, as she puts it, "Times were good." Anyone knowing this little lady can get in touch with her at the address of the little bungalow she so proudly calls 'home.' The address is 327 East 91st Street, Los Angeles." ⁵⁴

The always spunky performer was perpetually thankful for any help she received. The *National Vaudeville Association* gave more assistance to Minnie in the Fall of 1927. Minnie's letter of appreciation was printed in the *Vaudeville News* on October 8. In it, she stated "I am a cripple and not able to work at my profession, or at anything else whereby to make a living..." ⁵⁵ Later that year, she was described as a shut-in ⁵⁶ but she kept on living and being thankful for both her life and the help she got with making it work.

By 1930, Minnie had lost her home and her last husband to divorce. Yet she did not withdraw from society, nor did she lose touch with circus friends. At the 1931 funeral

of the legendary Lillian Leitzel, Minnie joined circus luminaries, many with whom she had once performed. ⁵⁷ Additionally, she was repeatedly elected chaplain of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Pacific Coast Showmen's Association, ⁵⁸ an organization which still exists today. This group came to call her "Mother Fisher" and likely provided some stability and emotional support to her by getting her out to see circuses that came to the Los Angeles area, including the Russell Bros. circus. Humorously, she appears twice in the *Billboard* article that documents some of the show folk's names which attended that circus – once as Minnie Fisher and again as Mrs. Charles Thomas. ⁵⁹

Minnie remained a lodger for the rest of her life. The 1940 census indicated she was widowed at the time. Further, it gives a different view of her early life because it stated that she merely attained an 8th grade education. Also noted is the fact that she hadn't worked at all in 1939. She had, however, "income from other sources." Perhaps there was some truth to her claim that she had purchased property in Wichita years earlier ⁶⁰ though land holdings in any of her names was never found. ⁶¹

Over and over again Minnie's body was bruised if not broken. But over and over again she sent herself out there, under canvas and roofs, to entertain, to inspire, to exhilarate and thrill. She was a professional showman and a consummate performer who continually pushed the limits of what her body could withstand. She never lost the effervescent enthusiasm for the thing that had given her so much, the circus. But Minnie wasn't invincible. Even she couldn't outrun the Reaper forever. Minnie Estelle Averette Patterson Fisher/Noble Schermer McCullough Thomas was on the sick list nearing the end of 1950 and died May 28, 1951 in Los Angeles. She is interred in that city's Pacific Coast Showman's Association Auxiliary, Section L, of Evergreen cemetery. **BW**

The author wishes to express her gratitude to Fred Dahlinger, for reigniting her passionate interest in Minnie and sharing intriguing pieces of information to keep her engaged; Mark Schmitt, for diving into search engines and websites so energetically while always saying "we will get it!"; Al Stencell, for providing insights into what an 1890s strip act entailed; Fred D. Pfening III for searching the massive Pfening Archive for Minnie; and Jean MacDonald for her constant and invaluable support.



A detail of the Ringling dressing tent image.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

Endnotes

1. "Minnie Fisher Refuses to Quit Circus, Despite a Fat Bank Roll," *The Daily Ardmoreite*, April 22, 1923 p. 12
2. Research uncovered several versions of Minnie's maiden name. For ease of reading, the name has been standardized to Averette, but can also be found as Averiette and Averett.
3. "Wedded to an Acrobat," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 13, 1886, p. 7.
4. "Love at the Circus," *Rochester (NY) Democrat and Chronicle*, March 28, 1886, p. 3.
5. "Minnie Averett Ran Away to Marry George Patterson," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 5, 1897, p. 9.
6. "Wedded to an Acrobat..." p. 7.
7. Ibid.
8. "Under the White Tents," *New York Clipper*, February 8, 1890, p. 791.
9. "Under the White Tents," *New York Clipper*, April 5, 1890, p. 59 and July 26, 1890, p. 307.
10. "White Tents," *New York Clipper*, April 11, 18, p. 76.
11. "Notes from the Frank A. Gardner Show," *New York Clipper*, January 9, 1892, p. 728
12. "Some Exciting Adventures," op. cit.
13. "Under the White Tents," *New York Clipper*, July 29, 1893, pp. 328, 342.
14. "Minnie Averett Ran Away..." op. cit.
15. "Under the White Tents," *New York Clipper*, May 19, 1894, p. 164.
16. "Some Exciting Adventures," op. cit.
17. "Notes from Donovan's Circus," *New York Clipper*, February 16, 1895, p. 795 and "Under the Tents," *New York Clipper*, May 11, 1895, p. 147.
18. "Some Exciting Adventures," op. cit. Coincidentally, she returned from Cuba with two other people who were noted as "artists" like her: Theodora Kleiber and Ada Thompson.
19. "Under the Tents," *New York Clipper*, March 28, 1896, p. 53.
20. "One Feature of a Great Whole," *The Ottawa Journal*, July 9, 1896, p. 5.
21. "Under the Tents," *New York Clipper*, April 3, 1897, p. 73.
22. "It Was a Revelation," *The Times*, Washington, D.C., 5/3/98 p. 6.
23. "Mrs. Noble Badly Shaken Up," *The Pantagraph*, January 17, 1898, p. 7.
24. "The Big Circus," *Anaconda Standard*, August 5, 1900, p. 21.
25. "Visiting in Alabama," *The Pantagraph*, December 5, 1898, p. 3.
26. "Seriously Ill in Chicago," *The Pantagraph*, March 14, 1899, p. 5.
27. "Circus Pleased Everybody," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 5/7/1900, p. 25.
28. "Fort Worth, Texas," *Red Wagon Annual: A Route Book of Ringling Brothers World's Greatest Shows, Season, 1898 Ringling Route Book*. Central Printing and Engraving Co. Chicago, p. 74. Also, a note about the 1900 Census: This should be a footnote: The 1900 U.S. Census records Minnie and Charles twice – once in Bloomington, where she was listed as Charles Noble's wife of three years, and once in Columbus where the Ringling Circus was performing in June. The Columbus listing, riddled with errors, documented Minnie as married for 9 years, having birthed two children, one of whom survived. Given her performance record to that date, there was little opportunity for her to have had one child, much less two.

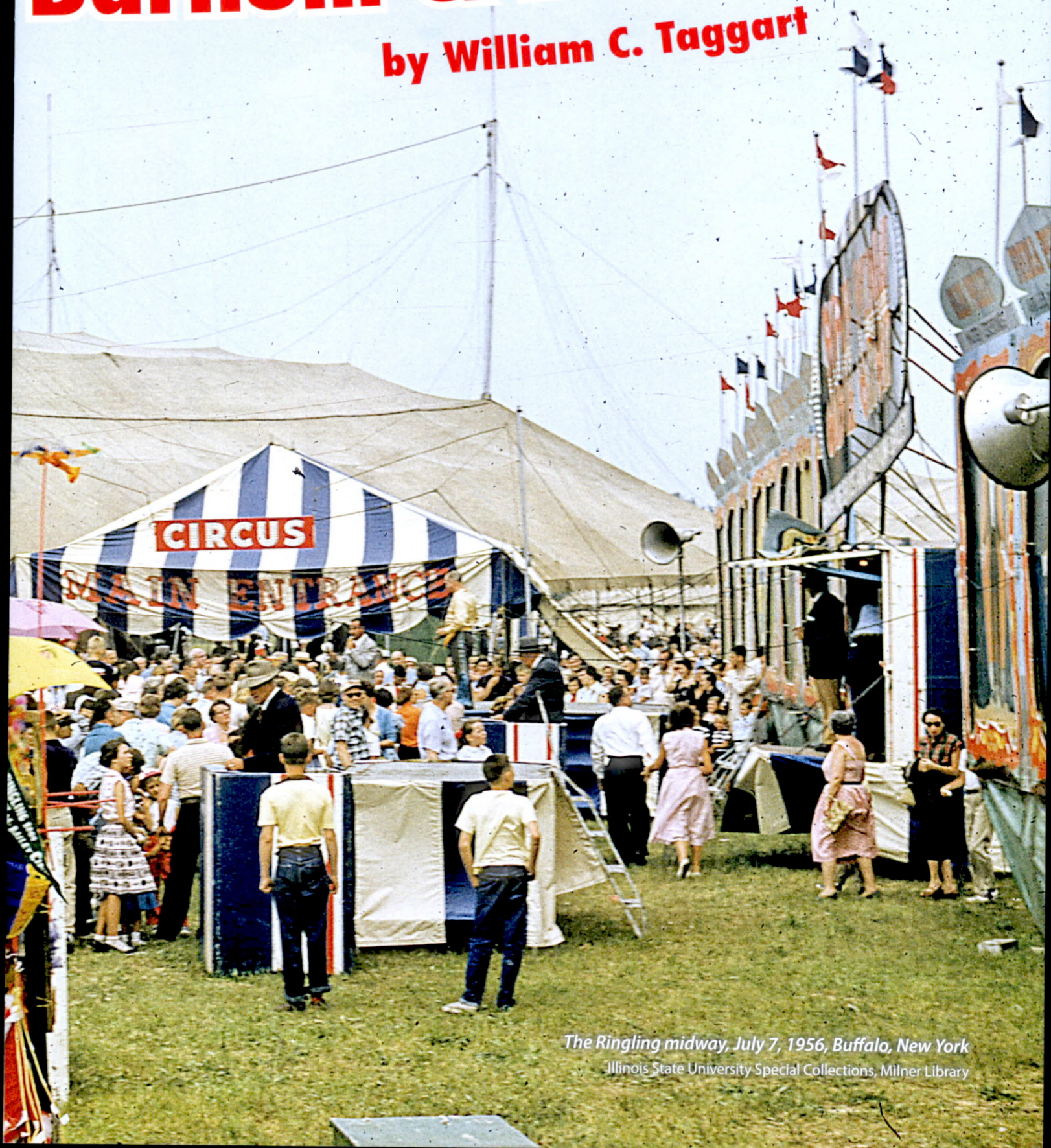
29. "Under the Tents," *New York Clipper*, April 26, 1902, p. 201.
30. "Vaudeville and Minstrel," *New York Clipper*, December 5, 1903, p. 970.
31. Advertisement in *Billboard*, January 20, 1906, p. 19.
32. Upon his death it was reported that Farley was a man who ran away at the age of fifteen to join a circus – "Strikebreaker Farley Dies," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, September 12, 1913, p. 4.
33. "Moved in Plaster Cast," *Variety*, November 14, 1908, p. 11.
34. "Some Exciting Adventures," op. cit.
35. "An Ogdensburg Exchange of Last Week Says:" *The Malone Farmer*, November 11, 1908, p. 3.
36. "Mrs. Minnie Fisher, Injured Last Fall, Brings Suit for \$20,000 <sic>," *Chateaugay Record and Franklin County Democrat*, July 23, 1909, p. 5
37. "Injured Rider Loses Her Appeal," *Ogdensburg Journal*, November 18, 1910, p. 4
38. "Some Exciting Adventures," op. cit.
39. "An Open Letter from Minnie Fisher," *New York Clipper*, September 14, 1907, p. 812.
40. "Victoria," *Variety*, December 24, 1911, p. 24.
41. "Aerial Artist is Unfortunate," *Dunkirk Evening Observer*, August 24, 1911, p. 5.
42. "Now with the Robinson Circus, Formerly a Professional Trained Nurse, Inaugurates Red Cross Movement," *Greensburg (Indiana) Standard*, July 27, 1917 p. 5.
43. "Santos & Artigas' Circus," *Billboard*, February 9, 1918, p. 31.
44. "Minnie Fisher Returns," *Billboard*, March 16, 1918, p. 28.
45. Kline, Tiny. *Circus Queen & Tinker Bell: The Memoir of Tiny Kline*. (Janet M. Davis, ed.) University of Illinois Press, Chicago. 2008, p. 223.
46. "Minnie Fisher Advises," *Billboard*, April 26, 1919, p. 35.
47. "About You! About You!! About You!!!" *New York Clipper*, March 26, 1919, p. 22.
48. "Under the Marquee," *Billboard*, April 26, 1919, p. 35.
49. "Under the Marquee," *Billboard*, September 6, 1919, p. 45.
50. "Sign a Barnum Act," *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 18, 1920, p. 3.
51. "Minnie Fisher Leaves John Robinson Circus," *Billboard*, July 31, 1920, p. 76).
52. Didrickson Zaharias, Babe. *This Life I've Led: My Autobiography*, (Harry Paxton, ed.) A. S. Barnes & Co., New York. 1955, p. 13.
53. "Minnie Fisher's 'Gameness,'" *Billboard*, December 1, 1923, p. 125.
54. "A Brave Woman," *Vaudeville News*, May 28, 1927, p.8.
55. "Never Turned Down by the N.V.A.," *Vaudeville News*, November 12, 1927, p. 7.
56. "As to the 'Shut-Ins,'" *Vaudeville News*, November 12, 1927, p. 6.
57. "Star's Ashes Laid Beneath Statue: Leitzel Paid Last Tribute," *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1932, p. A8.
58. "M. Fisher Again Chaplain," *Billboard*, January 13, 1945, p. 40.
59. "300 PCSA Members Are Guests at Russell Bros.' Performance," *Billboard*, May 8, 1943, p. 28.
60. "Everybody Interested in Circus and Performers," *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 23, 1920, p. 6.
61. There was one mention of an adopted child. In the November 4, 1944 issue (p. 54) of *Billboard*, it was reported that Minnie Fisher saw her adopted son, Buddy, for the first time in 16 months. No mention of a last name made finding this adopted son impossible. Was he a Thomas? A McCullough? A Fisher? A Noble? Surely not a Patterson...

Season of 1956
Ringling Bros. and



Barnum & Bailey

by William C. Taggart



The Ringling midway, July 7, 1956, Buffalo, New York
Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library



John Ringling North and Michael Burke observe performers in wardrobe at Winter Quarters, 1956.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

January 7, 1956 a notice appeared in *Billboard* announcing that Ringling Band Master Merle Evans would not be with the 1956 Edition of the show as he had resigned his position and signed to go out with his friend Orrin Davenport and work the winter Shrine dates. This was the first time Merle had not been with the show since 1918 when he had received a telegram from Charles Ringling, inviting him to become head of the Ringling Band. Merle prided himself in the fact that he never missed a performance except in 1942 when the Musicians Union was on strike for a short time.

With Merle gone it also meant that John Ringling North was without the services of the show's experienced secretary, the lovely Mrs. Merle Evans. Nena Evans, was a Texas gal, who ended up riding horses in Cole Bros. Circus and later married Merle and trouped with Ringling. She was "first lady on the lot" and took no guff from anyone. She was proficient in all of the roustabout's language and was noted for speaking her piece so that her thoughts were

understood. Nena also had a sharp sense of humor.

One veteran Ringling man who stayed with the show was Pat Valdo, the talented and highly respected Performance Director of the Greatest Show on Earth. Patrick Fitzgerald left his home in Binghamton, New York to join the Walter L. Main circus in 1902. While doing a comedy clown act a fellow performer gave him the name Valdo and Pat made the name official. In 1923 Charles Ringling asked the clown to assist Ringmaster Fred Bradna with his performance directing duties. In 1929 John Ringling invited Valdo to become Performance Director, a post that he still held in 1956. His lovely wife Laura, whom he married in 1914, traveled with him on the show. She was a member of the wire walking and bareback riding Meers Family. In 1956 Laura was enjoying her retirement while sitting in the back yard by her husband's office wagon, which was always parked next to the wardrobe tent.

It was also announced that Paul Eagles would be going to Sarasota from the West Coast to again serve as General

Agent of the big show. About this same time elephant man Hugo Schmidt announced that he was leaving the show to go out with Leonard Bros. circus. He was replaced by Baptiste Schreiber, who had assisted Hugo in 1955, and also Benny White, veteran bull man and a protégé of Louis Reed.

Lloyd Morgan was to remain on in the position of Manager of the big show. He was a capable, unassuming man from Georgia who had held many positions on the show, especially those having to do with all physical aspects of the circus. Before becoming Manager he had been Superintendent of Layout. Ben Wilson replaced Morgan as Lot Superintendent.

The famous press man, billposter artist, and longtime Ringling advance man Roland Butler of Palmetto, Florida had returned to the show in December of the previous year, but announced on January 28th that he was leaving after a battle with John Ringling North over salary and travel expenses. Butler, the man who changed a gorilla's name from Buddy to Gargantua and made the ape world famous had been with the show for 38 years, 28 of those as head of the Press Department. He first joined out with the Ringling circus in 1928, at the request of Charles Ringling.

Before the show returned from the January 1956 Havana, Cuba dates, the Director of Public Relations, Edward Knoblaugh suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. He returned to the states and left for his home in the West. Knoblaugh was a popular man and would be missed by those who had worked with him.

As a result of Knoblaugh's health, New York press agent, Zac Freedman took charge of the press department and was busy at work in the press car at winter quarters assisted by a New York newspaper man, Mr. Ken Mayo. Ken would later become a ticket seller on the show and eventually was one of the folks who founded the Sarasota Show Folks Club. This was in the absence of Mr. Frank Braden, who was not in the press car as usual writing stories for the press and program. Braden did not return to Ringling for the 1956 season, but instead toured the states promoting the movie *Trapeze* and spinning yarns of his young days working press for the Sells-Floto show.

It also became known that popular Ringmaster, Equestrian Director, and Announcer Count Nicholas was leaving Ringling to join the Frank McClosky and Walter Kernan on their newly reorganized Clyde Beatty circus. Count Nicholas, with his golden voice and dapper ways, was a popular figure on the show. Ringling announced that Nicholas would be replaced by Preston Lambert, who had worked

for Polack Bros. circus as vocalist and ringmaster.

Music for the Ringling show was taken from Frank Loesser's Broadway and Hollywood material. Loesser was most famous for writing the music for *Guys and Dolls*, both the musical and the eventual film, as well as for the song "See what the boys in the backroom will have" which was sung by legendary Marlene Dietrich in *Destry Rides Again*, a 1939 film. She always featured the hit song from the film in her popular night club act. When in New York she would attend the circus several times.

While all of this was happening, Max Weldy's people were working on the costumes for the 1956 show and Eddie Billette's shop was building the floats for the season. Wardrobe and floats were designed by the artist Marcel Vertès who had replaced Miles White as the show's designer. Vertès also created the production numbers and designed the program cover. He was a Hungarian who lived in Paris before the war and moved to the states before Hitler took Paris. While in the New York, Vertès designed the murals in the Café Carlyle and also designed sets and wardrobe for the film *Moulin Rouge* in 1951. His paintings of circus women were colorful and always had horses or dogs or other animals with the performers. Unfortunately, everyone who saw the circus remembered what Miles White had created in previous years and were not impressed with Vertès' designs.

Max Weldy did not travel with the show and it was hoped that the health of veteran wardrobe department head Mr. McCarthy would improve and that he would be able to go on the road. Jeannie Carson, veteran wardrobe mistress, and hardworking lady, was once again preparing to go out on the show. Elli Powell was to be Assistant Wardrobe Mistress; Elli was the wife of famous aerialist Albert Powell.

Sarasota was a busy little city during these months with all the winter quarters activities and rumors running rampant in circus circles about the 1956 season. Rehearsals for the show began at Sarasota Winter Quarters on March 5 and were in full swing by March 12. Richard Barstow and his sister Edith were in charge along with Pat Valdo and his assistant, Bob Dover. Barstow hired a dance captain from New York to assist with teaching the new dance steps to the ballet girls. The Barstows had agreed to nine weeks of work on the show. The show train was leaving on March 29 with arrival in New York on April 1.

We next learned at winter quarters that seasoned Menagerie Superintendent, Cecil R. Montgomery, would not be returning. He also worked as forage agent for the show, finding feed for the cat acts. It was announced that Albert



Michael Burke, Paul Eagles and Pat Valdo with Bob Dover, all as presented in the 1955 Ringling Route Book.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Rix would replace Montgomery. Rix was an excellent presenter of bears and from the old Carl Hagenbeck menagerie school.

Next, we heard that the popular Jack Burslem would be replaced as head porter at the trains. He was a veteran of the old Tom Mix circus and other West Coast shows. His lovely wife Kay was a member of one of the flying acts. It was rumored that my friend Ted Sato would replace Burslem. That never happened. Earl Arseneau became head porter. Ted left the show and opened a restaurant in Sarasota. He was another friend that I and the show would miss. Ted was an excellent photographer and had worked on the lot for the press department hosting writers and celebrities as well as taking excellent photographs.

The new Executive Director of Ringling, Michael Bailey Burke did not endear himself to the show workers when he suggested that the cooking and dining facilities, managed by each car porter on the train would be abolished. Where were working men to get cheeseburgers, hot coffee, and cold beers at night? This was not a practical move. This was also how car porters earned their livings. There is also an old saying, "a show travels on its stomach." Burke later had a change of heart because he was under pressure from the working bosses and show porters.

Executive Director Burke announced that there was a possibility that the show would be playing a few more buildings during the tour besides the Garden in New York, Boston Gardens, and the Cow Palace in San Francisco. He also announced that the Bill Doll Agency in New York would be working on the Garden press assisted by veteran

California circus press man Norman Carroll and Ralph "Peaceful" Allen. A small office in the Garden across from the circus main office at 317 West 49th street would be used by the press department. This building entrance was directly across from the Belvedere Hotel. New York advertising agency Foote, Cone, and Belding would be hired by North to do advertising in large markets.

The January 21, 1956 *Billboard* announced that Mr. Paul Eagles, acting as General Agent would be at winter quarters for meeting with North and Burke. Eagles would then depart for New York City to open his office at the Paramount Hotel. Zac Freedman was named head of the press department and Rudy Bundy, former boss of the front door, would become Director of Ticket Sales.

Billboard announced that veteran Ringling Treasurer Theo Forstall would not be going out with the show in 1956. Forstall would become treasurer of the Craft Shows, ending his 17 year career on Ringling. A native of Newark, New Jersey, Forstall entered show business in 1917 as a ticket seller on the Harry Pollack Rutherford Greater Shows. He eventually joined Patty Conklin in the concession department of Gentry and after a short time, Forstall became Treasurer of Gentry Brothers. He then moved to the John Robinson Circus. From 1929 to 1933 he was treasurer of the Al G. Barnes Circus.

Bobby DeLochte, veteran circus Cashier and Ticket Auditor, also decided to go back to his home in Peru, Indiana. Bobby had been on the road from the time he was a young man. Tammen and Bonville, owners of the Sells-Floto Circus and the *Denver Post*, hired the honest young man from

Denver to become treasurer of their show. Bobby would talk often of paying Buffalo Bill when the old man was on the Floto Show. Bobby said that, "the old man wanted cash every night."

One bit of good news for Ringling was that veteran trainmaster P.A. McGrath would stay with the circus. He was a popular man and ran an efficient train department full of hardworking razorbacks. These men would be challenged in 1956 as the show hit the road.

On March 12, the New York billing work for the Garden run was begun by Clyde Carelton and his staff. It was an eight man crew and used 24 sheet billposters. Four veterans would be on his staff, Pat Patterson, Sam Oken, Sydney Foote, and Henry Kober. The department would have four new trucks.

To assist Eagles it was announced in *Billboard Magazine* that Bill Taggart would become his secretarial aide at the New York office. At that point, I had been on the show for several years, working on the front door and on advance and inside ticket sales.

Early in the New Year in Sarasota I had enjoyed free time at the Lido beach, evenings at the drive in theater, work at winter quarters, and looked forward to the beginning of rehearsals for the 1956 season. On Saturdays and Sundays I sold souvenirs at winter quarters. During the week I continued to drive Margie Lawson to the grocery store, and daughter Linda to and from school. I had my flashy red Cushman motor scooter, that Lawson had given me, to drive around town while meeting my friends. That winter I put some miles on that trusty red machine.

Early in March, Lawson called me into their home on Bay Street and asked me if I would like to go to New York City for the rest of the winter and work at a circus office there until the show opened the season at the Garden. I was a bit surprised, thought it over for a few seconds and said sure. He proceeded to tell me that Rudy Bundy had called him and that Rudy wanted me to meet Paul Eagles. I was to meet the General Agent at winter quarters the next morning. I was told that Mr. Eagles would make arrangements for my train trip to New York and my room at the Belvedere Hotel, across from Madison Square Garden. We would be leaving at the end of the week. Wow, I was excited but a bit sorry to leave all my pals behind in Sarasota.

I made the overnight trip from Tampa to New York City, checked into the Belvedere Hotel, and was ready to meet my new boss Paul Eagles at the circus office in the Paramount Hotel at 235 West 45th street in Manhattan. Paul Eagles was a fine boss and a circus mentor. He was a widely



Richard Barstow leads rehearsals at Winter Quarters, 1956.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

respected West Coast circus man, an active Shrine member, and had been involved in West Coast circus activities for years. He grew up in Kansas but settled in California and started working in the family's hay and feed business. In the feed businesses he met many circus people from Al G. Barnes, Sells-Floto, and Tom Mix circuses. He was also involved in the Pan Pacific Circus.

His friends and pals were press agents like Bev Kelly, Frank Braden, Allen Lester. He was close to riding great May Wirth, Con Colleano, Clyde Beatty, and the great Mable Stark. Most of these folks stopped by the office to cut up jackpots and learn the latest news. When in town Braden lived at the Paramount Hotel. Radio and TV agent Charlie B. Schuler would also stop by when he was in town ahead of a show.

Once we started working, Eagles would treat me to breakfast every morning at the Paramount Hotel coffee shop, and then we would proceed on to the day's work. There would be meetings with railroad agents, owners of



Crowds vie for tickets during a 1956 stand.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

potential circus lots in various cities, and Madison Square Garden officials. Men who worked as bill posters, 24 hour personnel, feed agents, and press agents were always stopping by. I was busy answering the general mail, typing lot and rail contracts, and answering many telephone calls. The work day went by swiftly and in the early evening, night after night, we would meet press agent Frank Braden and his pal, newspaper syndication man Harry Cook, and we would proceed to their favorite chop house on 8th Avenue, Gilhouly's Steak House.

The evening would generally end with a stroll over to the lobby of the Belvedere Hotel at 319 West 49th Street for an hour of cutting up jackpots with some of the show people staying at the hotel. They loved to tell stories of the adventures of Billy Rose, when he operated the Diamond Horseshoe Night Club in the basement of the Belvedere. Frank's favorite was... "Said Bill Rose, to Sally Rand, Sally, I would like to see you dance without your fan, Sally danced

without her fan, Bill rose, and Sally ran." There were also a few stories of Braden's love affairs with a famous circus aerialist, and the time he lost his false teeth in the bathroom of the Astor hotel.

Michael Burke became heavily involved with the distribution of press passes for the New York run and the press department men felt that he was doing severe damage to the show's publicity possibilities. Zac Freedman had little choice but to reduce passes for the run. It upset newspaper men, radio and television people as well as police, fire departments, and even sanitation department men who worked around the Garden. The immigration attorney Mr. Siegel was enraged; he needed passes to get acts into the country. Lorella Val-Mery worked the run for Ringling press doing radio and television work. Eventually, Wally Beach of Springfield, Massachusetts would join the press department.

Burke also announced that the show would be in the New York Garden from April 4 to May 14. Opening night would be a benefit for the New York Police Athletic League. Ticket prices for the Garden would be \$1.50, \$2.50, \$3.00, \$4.00, \$5.00 and \$6.50. Children under 12 would be one half price.

We also learned that veteran Ringling men George W. Smith, Leon Pickett, and Doc Hall would work as contracting agents. Smith had not been on the show since 1944 and was not on good terms with John Ringling North. North always considered Smith a Robert Ringling man. The Ringling and the North sides of the family were always fighting for control of the show. George W. Smith was the Manager of the show during the Robert Ringling era and was jailed for a time, as a result of the Hartford fire in 1944. Smith started his circus career as a bus boy on the old Forepaugh-Sells show and worked his way up to the eventual Ringling General Manager position.

I was pretty young and naive to be living by myself in New York, but I did enjoy the experience. There were regular vaudeville shows at the famed Palace Theater and I saw the great Joe Howard of "I wonder who is kissing her now" fame as well as the "Boop Boop De Doo" girl...Miss Helen Kane. Later I had the pleasure of meeting Joe Howard one evening at the hotel. He had just finished a performance at the Palace, still had his make up on. He was very kind to a young fan and we both enjoyed our drinks.

One night we had a great snow storm but I managed to get to a movie house that was showing *Rebel Without a Cause* with James Dean. I do remember that I had a long, cold walk back to the hotel from the movie theater. The

next day I walked over to the show office through deep snow. Most of the city was shut down and you could walk easily about Times Square. The Big Apple was like a ghost town.

Once in a while Paul Eagles would rent a car and he and I would drive out to a town that the show was to play and take a look at the lot, search out the water connections, detail the route from the train to the lot, check out the location of the runs, where the circus train would be unloaded, and perhaps call on city hall about a permit for the show. I enjoyed these excursions as a day out of Manhattan.

The winter months went fast, although I missed my friends in Sarasota. Sometimes, I would receive a call from Dieter Fredonia or Alfred Burton, but most of the time I was on my own. When circus acts would stop in town to appear on the Ed Sullivan Show, I would meet them at the hotel for a visit or a meal at a nearby Italian restaurant on 8th Avenue. It was then that I could keep up on the Sarasota rehearsal news.

Before long the basketball tournaments came to Madison Square Garden and after that it was time for the 1956 Edition of the Greatest Show on Earth to open on April 4. There was always more activity at the office as press agents were stopping by, radio and television folks were asking for passes and other favors or to arrange interviews, and people were anxious to receive contracts for supplies for the circus.

Mr. Eagles and I would have lunch, at least once a week, with Paul Miller, who with his brother Frank, owned the contract or privilege for the circus concessions in the Garden and on the road.

This was a most valuable circus property and Miller Bros. ran it extremely well with their many loyal and valuable employees. It was always rumored, that the Miller brothers bankrolled the opening of the show each season. I believe that rumor to be partially true.

One night after dinner Paul Eagles and I strolled over to Madison Square Garden, entered the stage door and went out into the audience to see Danny Thomas and the Lawrence Welk band. They put on a big show for the Dodge Automobile Dealers convention. The dealers were sponsors of the Lawrence Welk and Danny Thomas television shows. It was an unforgettable night.

We knew that the circus train would soon be on its way to New York. The train left Sarasota on March 29, with 16 flats, 4 elephant stock cars, 18 sleepers, 2 horse cars with 36 liberty horses, 11 rosin backs, 12 draft horses, 6 high school horses, 12 saddle horses, and 36 burros. There were



Performer, Logano (Luis R. Lorenzo on the left) at the concession rack, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

24 young punk elephants, 18 mature bulls, and 8 medium size bulls. All were Indian elephants except Emily, a young African. Modoc and Babe, two old troupers, were left in Sarasota along with two punks. On arrival they would begin the move into the Garden after the last basketball game on April 1. Circus workingmen moved into the building as soon as the basketball floors were removed. Wagon after wagon rolled down the ramp, at the Garden backdoor, and into the basement.

I was with Mr. Eagles at the Paramount Hotel office one evening shortly before the show was to open when he received a call from John North. Eagles was told that under no circumstance would he make a payment of several thousand dollars to the Teamsters Union. This had been an annual payoff from the show to the union for using their own non-union working men at the Garden engagement. When Concello and Frank McClosky were in charge they



Performers at Winter Quarters complete dress rehearsal of Ringling Rock and Roll production.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

personally dealt with the New York mob and cash payments were made to keep the heat off the show. Concello never consulted with John Ringling North, he just made the payments and the show went on. The "Sneeze Mob" knew how to do things even in New York. Concello had contacts under his management. The "blue room" or gambling on the show was handled by a mobster named Banjo. He was married into the Meyer Lansky family. The fix was always in. John North and Michael Burke were above all of this and the results were terrible for the show.

Paul was worried and told me to prepare for trouble as the show moved into the building. Paul then received a call that the dirt to cover the Garden floor for the show would not be trucked into the Garden because of Teamster Union pressure. Later that night we went to the building and discovered groups of Teamster pickets around the building. Paul Eagles was a troubled man and longed for the days of Art Concello, the show's "little Caesar."

On April 2, Noyelles Burkhart, Paul Eagles, John Ringling North, and Michael Burke had a conference and agreed that the picketing should be stopped by an injunction from a New York court. This would allow the show to move safely in to the building on the first of April. They did not want to be forced to cancel the General Foods television show for April 3 as the circus would be out \$100,000. A court finally issued an injunction and picketing was stopped for several hours. Former aerialist Albert Powell, the Sheik (a former usher), wire walker Slat Beeson, and a few others joined Burkhart and went out to the street and passed out injunction notices to the picketers. They were hostile but eventually the picketing stopped and the big show moved into the building. As the show went to work the television network staff, crews, and equipment moved into position and eventually opening rehearsals began under the direction of Pat Valdo, Bob Dover, Barbette, our aerial director, and Richard and Edith Barstow.



The Alzana troupe performs, July 2, 1956, Elmira, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

Before the show could open we learned that the Teamsters Union would not let its drivers haul dirt and tanbark into the Garden. This material was critical for the show. However, at the last minute Pat Valdo consulted with Paul Eagles and Lloyd Morgan and it was agreed to cover the huge Garden floor with sheets of wallboard taped together and then covered with a layer of tarpaper. Finally, coconut matting was placed on top of the tarpaper covered with a thick layer of colored sawdust. It was hoped that this would solve the flooring problem. Workers toiled day and night to move the circus into the building and at the same time the new bandmaster, Izzy Cervone and his orchestra also started rehearsing at the bandstand. For the first time the band had string instruments, so I called it an orchestra.

On Wednesday night, April 3, the television program began with a short introduction of John Ringling North and then Preston Lambert blew his whistle and started the show. Actor and television personality Robert Cummings

and his family did running commentaries as the show went on. Because the American Guild of Variety Artists were also striking, the show clowns Emmett Kelly and Otto Griebling were out, as was dressage rider Marion Seifert, and the Fredonia's Risley act. The King of Clowns, Felix Adler, did an excellent bit of banter with actor Cummings and his family after John Ringling North's introduction.

For the General Foods Television production the Harold Alzana troupe were the highlight of the show; especially when Harold walked along the upper railing of the Garden balcony on his way to the high wire. Feature riders Ilonka and her cousin Evy Karoly did center ring riding acts and later Paul Jung's Misfit Army made an appearance and shot clown Frankie Saluto out of the canon to the top of the Garden. The Hildalys did a perilous act on upside down bicycles suspended fifty feet in the air. It was billed as "Fearsome Feats on High." Takeo Usui's slide for life on a swaying un-guyed wire to the top of the Garden was well



Miss Mara in production wardrobe.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

received as was the Sabrejets flying act with the popular catcher Dick Anderson. The ever popular Miss Mara did a center ring trapeze heel catch act which always was an audience pleaser. The great Palacio Flyers were missed high over the center ring but they had notified Ringling that they would be on the Polack Show in 1956. Ringling tried to replace them with a Swiss flying act, the Denats, but they had an accident in Holland and were not available.

During the feature, tiger act trainer Trevor Bale had trouble moving his props as the bases and legs were getting caught in the newly installed coconut matting on the Garden floor. The stand was large and heavy as it had seating positions for the ten featured tigers. Justino Loyal also had problems with the footing for the rosinback horses as they cantered around the ring. The horses did not trust their footing. Near the end of the show some of the punk elephants ran from the arena and out to the Garden lobby causing some confusion. The show included the *Say It with*

Flowers spec and the *Hoop de Doo* finale.

On Thursday April 4, a Ringling benefit performance was given for the New York City Police Athletic League with lots of dignitaries in attendance and an excellent house. Over \$76,000 was raised for the charity. The show went on without any hitches but clowns Emmett Kelly and Otto Griebling were missed. The usual Broadway celebrities were mostly missing, as the Theater Union instructed its members not to attend in support of the Teamsters and AGVA unions.

I was busy during the Garden run working in the office helping Edna Antes, Erma Pushnik, and Gerry Usicki, a new secretary. About twice a week between shows we would head over to Al Muller's German Restaurant for drinks and dinner. Some nights after the show I would go to the movies on 42nd street with my pal Alfred Burton and clown Duane Thorpe.

My mom and aunt and uncle visited me during the Garden run as did Dr. and Mrs. Stanley Johnson and family from Clyde, New York, my hometown. One night we all enjoyed a fine Italian dinner at Mamma Leones Restaurant. As usual it was good to see folks from home.

Near the end of the run attendance at the Garden hit rock bottom and when the last week arrived it was believed that the show's Garden income was down \$250,000. That was money that could have been used by the show to cover pre-season expenses and bad days out on the Western road. The show was in trouble, hurt by union problems paired with poor publicity and bad press resulting from Michael Burke's order to cut back on press passes. And, of course, the American Guild of Variety Artists boycott of the circus hurt in a union town. The May weather was wonderful in the New York area and that also hurt indoor circus business.

Ringling closed in the Garden on Sunday May 13, after a run of forty days. By early afternoon that day, Rudy Bundy, Edna Antes, and I were on a train heading to our next date - Boston, Massachusetts. We needed to get there to prepare the Boston Garden ticket office. I was enjoying the trip and looking forward to playing the Boston Garden. We enjoyed a fine meal in the dining car on our way, and as always, Edna and Rudy were excellent travel companions. The run was 313 miles and we arrived in Boston at the Manger Hotel in the evening. Our hotel was attached to the Boston Garden and we did not need to go outside, except for some fresh air and a brisk walk.

When we arrived in Boston we received the news that the American Guild of Variety Artists had rented a build-



The four ticket wagons painted in blue and white stripes, 1956.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

ing and planned to put on a variety circus "to day and date us." Showman George Hamid blasted AGVA for their tactics and stated that the Ringling Show was "a symbol of the entertainment world." Even with opposition, our show did good business in Boston and it was sad to see many of our former Ringling people appearing with the other show. I missed Marion Seifert, the Fredonias, Emmett and Otto. By now Felix and Amelia Adler also had left Ringling.

We finished the Boston run in good shape financially as the AGVA show did not do serious damage to Ringling ticket sales. On Sunday evening, May 20, the show loaded out of the Boston Garden for the 536 mile run on the Boston & Maine (B&M), the New York, New Haven & Hartford (NYNH&H), the Lehigh & Hudson (L&H), and the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) to Baltimore, Maryland. As in previous years, there would be a food and water stop for circus stock after we crossed the Poughkeepsie railroad bridge and arrived in the Maybrook, New York rail yards. Circus folks headed from the train to the small shops on the main street of the little town. The horsemen and bull department guys were busy feeding and watering their stock by the sides of their respective cars.

After a two hour stop the train was in its way to Baltimore. I was lucky enough to have a bunk in the clown car across from Walter Guice and Paul Jerome who kept me amused with stories of their vaudeville and circus years. Paul Jerome was back on the show and the neon clown was full of funny tales. I was to move into a different car once we hit Baltimore.

When we arrived on the lot in Baltimore for the May 22 and 23 engagements, Edna Antes, Rudy Bundy, and I saw the new four pole blue big top. It looked great with the American flag flying high over the first pole and the Ringling flags on the other three poles. Because of a shortage of help, the new menagerie top was not to be used until the Washington stand.

For the first time the four Ringling ticket wagons, all painted with white and blue stripes were on the midway and the new big top marquee or entrance also featured blue and white stripes like the ticket wagons. We were all happy to be out of buildings and on a real lot with sunshine, fresh air and some rain and mud thrown in, just to keep us in high spirits.

It was also fine to see all the folks that had come from

Sarasota to meet us in Baltimore. The Sarasota train that met us was made up of 31 flats, 6 sleepers, and carried 28 seat wagons and the four ticket wagons in addition to the big top, menagerie top, side show top and cook house. This was our first stand under canvas.

After we arrived in Baltimore, and looked over the show, Rudy Bundy invited Edna and me to have dinner with him at the Lord Baltimore Hotel. That was a real treat. We stayed at the hotel that night and did not move into our coaches until the next morning before going to the lot.

Eddie Mader, a former usher from New York, was to be in charge of inside ticket sales. Michael Burke had come to the late conclusion that last year lots of money was lost by not having inside ticket sellers. He learned, finally, that it was better to have inside ticket sellers selling reserved seats with the show earning the money. When ticket sellers were not on the hippodrome track just before the start of the performance the public paid ushers to move them to better seating.

Since Theo Forstall and Bobby DeLochte were not in the silver treasurer's wagon, Rudy had hired a ticket seller out of the Mr. Fontaine's Madison Square Garden staff, to assist him with the money. Theo and Bobby, two seasoned showmen, were sorely missed and that is an understatement. The fellow from the Garden was a nice chap but not a seasoned wagon man and a bit of a drinker. This gave Rudy Bundy a serious problem. Theo and Bobby spent hours in the wagon; one was always there until they closed, and before the wagon was hauled to the train. They were efficient money men, had knowledge of handling tickets and money, and were known by the bankers in the towns that the show played. Edna Antes and I did not look forward to spending a season on the road without Bobby and Theo. Each of these men had over forty years of experience with financial operations.

We did fair business in Baltimore on Tuesday and Wednesday, May 22 and 23. A bit of rain hurt business. Half house matinees and three quarter houses at night but at least we were on the road. A story appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* stating that Dave Beck of the Teamsters Union had told reporters that the Ringling show would not last the season. This was not good news to read. With stories like that and Teamsters pickets at the perimeter of the lot, business was hurting. John Ringling North made a strong statement to the press that neither the AGVA nor Teamsters unions represented the management or employees of the show.

Our next stand was Washington D.C., a 43 mile jump

on the Pennsylvania Railroad. We were there May 24 thru 27, a Thursday thru Sunday. The lot was muddy and the first matinee was very late and only 200 attended the performance. Some of the punk elephants went on a rampage after being unloaded. The elephant department had a long chase on their hands. As a result horses and elephants did not work until the night show.

At this stand the new menagerie top was put up for the first time and for one of the very few times during the season. The unusual suspended top had four center poles, sets of side poles, and no quarter poles.

We played to a one half-house that first evening. I thought back to the sunny day in 1953 when I went to the show at that lot. After the performance, I made my way to the backyard and horse tops to ask Doc Henderson, the vet, for a job on ring stock. It was a fine memory and one I always cherished. On Friday night Alfred Burton and I went to town see a movie and find a German restaurant.

Edna and I were in her ticket distribution wagon, after the May 27 evening performance, packing away tickets when Sammy Elterman, who was in charge of the front door, came to tell us that Elizabeth Nock's sway pole had cracked during the performance. Her husband had caught her in mid-air as she was starting to fall. We were delighted to hear that all was well.

Sunday night the show loaded out for a 137 mile jump on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Edna moved into her stateroom in car 369, the *Little Rock*. Her room was next to Doc Henderson and mine was down the hall of the same car, a small stateroom. The new assistant to Rudy Bundy was in the room next to me. I missed being in the car with my pals Theo, Bobby, and Ted Sato.

After Washington we rolled north to Philadelphia, a jump of 137 miles on the PRR. We were on that lot showing from May 28 until closing on June 2. Business was just fair in the City of Brotherly Love. The first matinee did not start until late in the afternoon. We played the usual lot in the city, and had the James E. Strates Shows, a carnival and railroad show, in front of us. All of this made for an interesting week with Ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds and lots of razzle out in front. There was a good cookhouse on Strates and I went there on breaks to eat and cut up jackpots with the carnival folks.

A fine old man, William Dwyer, visited the circus in Philadelphia. He had been on the Ringling show from 1909 to 1955. Noyelles Burkhart entertained him at lunch in the Ringing Cookhouse. Joey Hodgini was now Noyelles' assistant as Walter Rairden, another show veteran, did not



People arriving for the matinee performance, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

choose to be out that season. Walter was an excellent wagon man who had been on Sells-Floto, Cole Bros. and the Ringling show. His specialty was working as a "patch" solving local problems.

On Monday, June 4 we moved into the railroad yards of Wilmington, Delaware a jump of 22 miles on the Pennsylvania Railroad and Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O). With a short haul, the show was up on time and both the matinee and evening shows were on time. Business was okay. Many friends of local circus flyer catcher, Dick Anderson attended the performances to meet their hometown hero. Anderson always was a jovial and friendly man.

Tuesday, June 5, we moved 82 miles on the PRR to Atlantic City. Railroad problems were the cause of a late arrival and seat wagons were still coming off the flats at 1:30 p.m. The matinee was at 5:30 p.m. and night performance 8:45 p.m. Not much rest for performers and property men between shows. The menagerie was not erected and the

horses were on a picket line for the day. Edna and I had a visit with Manager Lloyd Morgan and we found him extremely frustrated with the lack of workers and problems caused by the union pickets. Morgan was a hard-working man and always concerned with the welfare of the circus. He was becoming tired and frustrated.

Wednesday, June 6, in the early hours of the morning, the circus trains moved 79 miles on the PRR railroad to Levittown, Pennsylvania. As on the previous day the matinee did not start until 5:00 p.m. Once again the main problem was railroad problems and a shortage of help. We were really missing the old school circus ushers, forty of them, who worked hard for the satisfaction of making some cash in the big top by seating customers in better seats.

Thursday, June 7, Oceanport, New Jersey was a date I remember for the tight lot, lots of sand, and a late matinee.

Friday and Saturday, June 8 and 9, the show played Newark, New Jersey. We arrived late after only a 38 miles



Unloading the big top center poles, July 12, 1956, Youngstown, Ohio.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

jump on the PRR railroad. This was the first city that I ever played on the show back in 1953. It was like old home week for me. The matinee started at 3:00 p.m. and the night performance on time. Edna and I were looking forward to having a good dinner, at a highly recommended Italian restaurant, in the heart of the city. She had eaten there before with Frank McClosky. "Mr. McClosky," as Edna always called him, was a man with wide knowledge of the best eateries in the cities that the circus played.

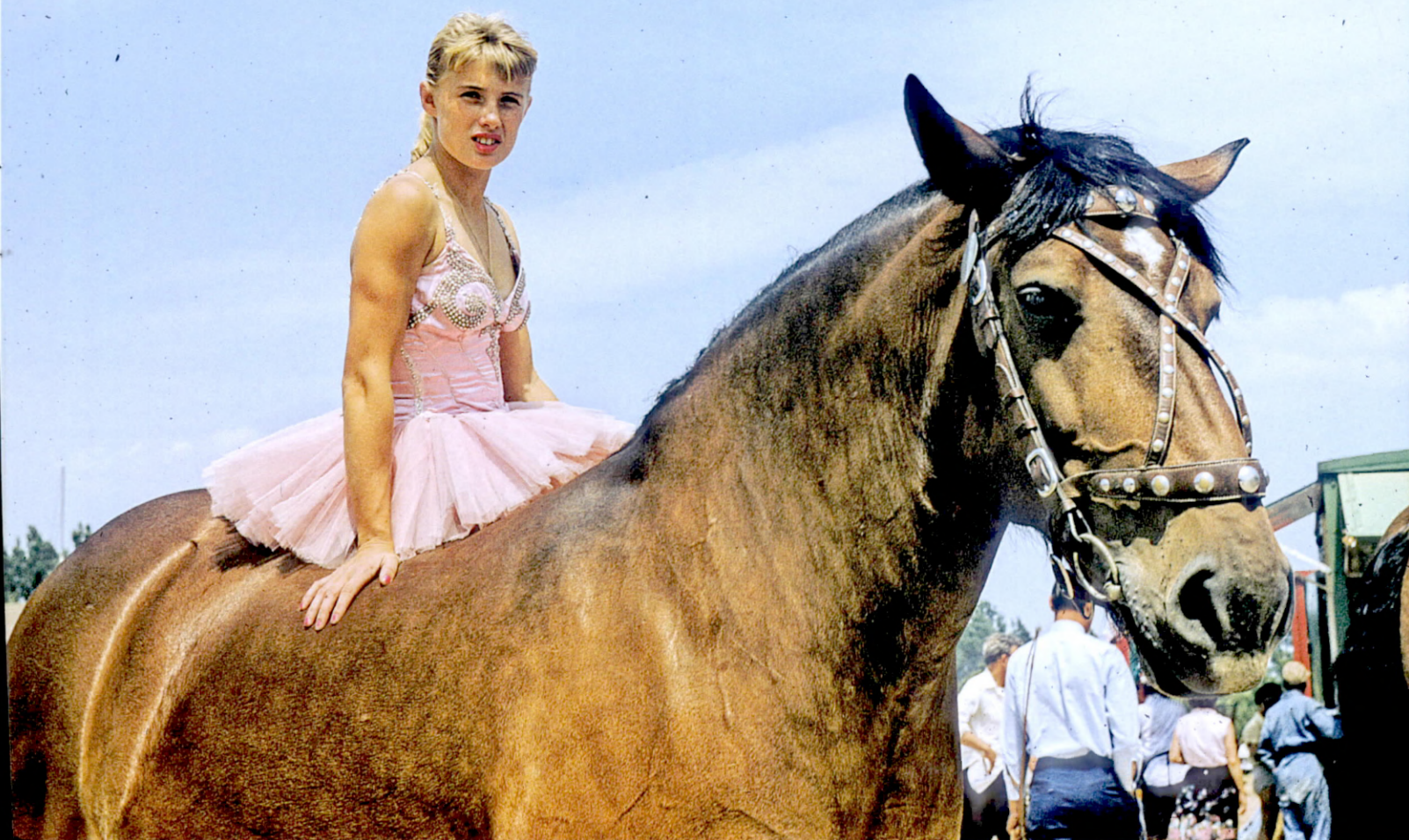
Sunday, June 9, Poughkeepsie, New York: We jumped 86 miles from the metropolitan area of New Jersey to up-state New York. This was an eventful trip on the Erie & NH railroads with a car derailment.

There was a slight drizzle for most of the day and the lot was muddy. I sat in the "yellow wagon" selling tickets most of the day. The wagon was actually painted with white and blue stripes but to circus folks it was always the yellow wagon. I remember looking out at potential customers

walking through the mud.

My friends, Gordon Turner and Louis Brusie, were there, accompanied by Gordon's mother. They were all enjoying the circus atmosphere. Gordon was busy taking photographs of the new menagerie top. Luckily Gordon wrote an excellent article for *Bandwagon* about the 1956 season and published several of his photographs. The matinee started at 5:00 p.m. and I was able to hurry to the cookhouse for my Sunday dinner.

Monday, June 11, Bridgeport, Connecticut: We moved into our first Connecticut stand of the season with a jump of 67 miles on the New Haven Railroad. Matinee started at three in the afternoon with lots of old time Ringling and Barnum & Bailey circus people in attendance. Curtis, the veteran cookhouse waiter, proudly entertained his relatives. We played one of my favorite lots right near Long Island Sound. Both performances were well attended but on the "blow off" I happened to hear customers complaining



Evy Karoly on her horse, July 6, 1956, Batavia, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

about the new circus music. They missed Merle Evans and his real circus band.

June 12 and 13, Hicksville, Long Island, New York: We went from New England back 67 miles to Long Island. We were on the New Hampshire, Long Island, and New York railroads and it was an uneventful move. Here, at the first evening performance, we had the first straw house of the season. Edna had to bring out the special undated tickets, with no seat numbers, once the seat tickets were sold out. The show always carried these special tickets which were only used for straw houses.

For some unknown reason, the liberty horses jumped around at the back door and some "yard lice" had to scramble out of their way. No one was seriously injured. It was always dangerous to bring performing stock into the three rings during a straw house, especially horses and elephants.

Thursday, June 14, we were back in Stamford, Connecticut. After a 43 mile run on the NYNH&H lines. As

usual, in the morning, I saw lovely Evy Karoly riding one horse and leading two horses from the train to the lot. It was unusual to find a center ring performer working with ring stock but she was always a great trouper. A teenage circus fan, from New England, became a great friend of Evy's and would tag along on the Connecticut dates. Later I found out that he was Peter Kinosh, who would one day work on Ringling, Vargas, and other shows. Once sawdust gets in your veins you really are hooked.

Friday, June 15, Waterbury, Connecticut was a 32 mile move on the NYNH&H lines. Arrived late so matinee started late, one half house afternoon, three quarter for the evening. Waterbury will always be remembered by show folks as the home of movie star Rosalind Russell and clown Chuck "he can run fast" Burns. It also has a wonderful local park that I remember fondly and in the center of town a famous watering trough featuring a Morgan horse statue. Chuck Burns and all of clown alley hammed it up for Chuck's family and friends. Pat Valdo and Bob Dover were



Charles Moroski working liberty horses in the center ring, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

constantly worried about the punk elephants acting up in the back yard. Smokey Jones, the new elephant man, had his hands full as there was trouble almost every day.

Saturday, June 16, New Haven, Connecticut: We moved 32 miles into New Haven on the New Haven line. Lots of Yale college students on the lot. Lee Brown, one of the new tickets sellers, walked to the lot with me. His wife was Winifred Colleano, a great aerialist and sister of Con Colleano, the world's best slack wire artist. In the afternoon Pat Valdo had to cut the elephant number, *Ringling Rock and Roll*, as the punks took off after being scared by an ambulance siren. It was obvious to everyone on the show that some of the punk elephants were serious trouble. They needed the hard hand of bull man Hugo Schmidt who unfortunately had left for another show. Edna and I went to a little café across from the lot for a quick bite to eat before the evening show.

Sunday, June 17, Plainfield, Connecticut: Show arrived

late after a 26 mile short jump on the NH line. As usual the menagerie was side walled and I was able to climb up on the roof of a cage wagon and get some great shots of the elephants and other animals. It was a beautiful sunny day for filming. It was a 3:00 p.m. matinee with a half house followed by a three quarter house in the evening. This was the closest the show had played to Hartford since the great fire of 1944. There were many sad memories of that day. I was able to go into the big top, in the afternoon, to watch the spectacular performance of the Welsh man, Harold Alzana on the high wire.

Monday, June 18, Willimantic, Connecticut: A 46 mile jump on the New Haven brought us into the city. This was a small city and was not often played by Ringling. On the bus ride to the lot, we could look out and see the historic stone mill buildings built in the last century. The city was noted for the manufacture of thread and textiles. We did not have a strong advance and were not looking forward to good



Trevor Bale in the center ring big cage working the tiger act, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

business but were surprised by the strength of the matinee and night shows. This was our last Connecticut date.

Tuesday, June 19, Providence, Rhode Island: A 58 mile jump on the NH railroad brought us into the Providence yards. There was a nice crowd there to see the sections unload. They were thrilled to see Smokey Jones ride old Harold, our elephant horse, up the road leading the herd of 53 elephants. As we rode the bus to the lot we all laughed at what we called the Smokey Jones Show. He was a colorful guy leading his herd. The train was delayed due to railroad trouble and there were lots of folks on the lot watching the men drive stakes, spread canvas, put the side poles in place, and finally see the big top lifted into the air.

Edna and I opened the ticket distribution wagon and prepared the tickets for inside ticket and wagon sales. Hilda Burkhart was there and ready to work the tax box. Ticket wagons were open by 11:00 a.m. and ready to make sales for the matinee which unfortunately did not begin until

four in the afternoon. Bobby Hasson had plenty of time to grind out sideshow sales. Harry Doll and Señorita Carmen were on the bally platform most of the day.

Once the matinee started the punk elephants went on a rampage in the backyard and were not able to work the matinee. Pat Valdo was ready to ship many of them back to winter quarters. What was missing was the strong hand of Hugo Schmidt.

That evening we had a party at the cars for Ilonka Karoly. We listened to a portable radio playing the latest hit songs and had some refreshments. It was very late when the trains started to pull out of town.

Wednesday, June 20, we jumped 43 miles to New Bedford, Massachusetts. We played to a light house at the matinee and a bit better one in the evening. I was late closing the ticket wagons and could hear the sound of the bibles being tossed in the big top, as the seat wagons were being torn down. By the time I caught the bus to the train, with my



The midway and main entrance, July 9, 1956, Warren, Pennsylvania.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

friend and fellow ticket seller Brownie, the big top was fluttering to the ground as the evening fog came rolling over the lot.

Edna and I enjoyed a drink with Doc Henderson, in our car, before it was time to get some rest. Doc liked his bourbon in the evening after a long day.

Thursday, June 21, Fall River, Massachusetts: We jumped 26 miles north on the New Haven to this old show town. The circus lot was the one used years ago by Buffalo Bill and all the other shows. In the morning Edna and I had breakfast in the cookhouse with Noyelles and Hilda Burkhart and Joey Hodgini. There was lots of conversation about the old Cole Show days. We had a good matinee and a three quarter house at night. A band member, Renee Giannone, the trumpet player had a heart attack and passed away during the matinee.

Friday, June 22, we were in the railroad yards of Worchester, Massachusetts. It was a seventy-five mile jump

on the NYNH & H line. The trains were late on arrival and they had trouble unloading the second section. The last several days we were short of help in the usher department and therefore it was a slow process spreading the canvas and later unloading the seat wagons. It was, as usual, a late matinee. Two performers, Maggie Smith and Gladys Rimmer, kept busy working cross word puzzles before the late matinees. Some performers worked for cherry pie, setting up seats almost every day. Evy Karoly continued to ride one horse and lead two with the ring stock men to and from the lot. She was secretly rewarded by General Manager Michael Burke with fifty dollars cash every week. Evy deserved the extra money. Weather was good and we had a one half house matinee and a three quarter house that night.

Saturday, June 23, Springfield, Massachusetts: We were late with only a 54 mile jump on the New York Central but did make a quick haul to the fairgrounds, a great lot on the banks of the Connecticut River. The show ran ads in the



Gerry Usicki, Edna Antes, the author's mother, and Alfred Burton enjoy a break from the circus lot.

Author's Collection

local paper appealing for workers to join the show. A few men and boys showed up at the green hornet to be hired. Matinee did not start until 3:30 p.m. and the cat acts did not work as the prop department was short of men to set up and remove the steel cages. Trevor Bale was not happy and he let Pat Valdo know it. Trevor did not want his cats to become lazy.

I had made arrangements with my mother to drive over from our home in Salem. Because of the Sunday off in Albany, I had invited Edna Antes, Gerry Usicki, Michael Burkes's secretary, and Alfred Burton to come to Salem and spend a day in the country. We were all looking forward to getting away from the show. Mom attended the evening show and immediately after the blow off we were on our way to New York state via Vermont.

Sunday, June 24, Salem, New York: Edna, Gerry, Alfred, and I spent a restful day in little Salem, a place where my family had lived since before the American Revolution.

We had a late breakfast and then, after packing a picnic lunch, we drove south to Lake Lauderdale, just north of Cambridge, New York. We all enjoyed swimming and sunbathing in this picturesque little lake and later took a drive up Colfax Mountain where we could see the Green Mountains of Vermont, the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and the Adirondack Mountains of New York. That night we grilled steaks and enjoyed a nice potato salad before playing gin rummy until bedtime.

Monday, June 25, Albany, New York: The three sections of the Ringling train had arrived after a one hundred and two mile jump on the New York Central from Springfield, Massachusetts. They unloaded on Sunday and completed most of the setup by early afternoon.

While unloading the train, one flat car jumped the tracks because a switch had been left open. This created a problem for the railroad crew. Mr. Donovan of the New York Central and his men assisted Mr. McGrath and our



Roberto De Vasconcellos, center ring dressage rider mounted on his horse, July 6, 1956, Batavia, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

crew in getting the car back on track. Show folks attended the local movie theater and crowded local restaurants. The movie theater in Albany is the Proctors named after its founder, who incidentally, was once a circus Risley act performer, in his younger days.

Monday, my mother drove us to Albany so that we could start on our regular day's work of distributing tickets, opening the ticket wagons, and the tax box. Rudy Bundy seemed pleased that we had enjoyed our Sunday away from the show. There were several pickets out at the front of the lot trying to tell everyone that the circus workers were on strike. Their efforts were not successful. Gordon Turner told me that the lot we were playing was the James E. Strates Carnival lot. There was plenty of space for parking. At the cookhouse that afternoon we learned that a laborer had been found dead in the train and that one worker had suffered a broken leg during set up. We had a good afternoon audience and a three quarter house that night.

Tuesday, June 26, Schenectady, New York: We jumped 17 miles on the New York Central to the General Electric city. Our cars were parked near the James E. Strates Show train. It was a long haul out to Delanson Road, an old, closed army base where we played. It was the dirtiest and most miserable lot I ever remembered. Nat Eagles, the sideshow impresario from Strates, visited at the matinee. One show truck went off the road on the haul that night and a wagon was turned over but no one was injured. The liberty horses raised a ruckus before the matinee and one broke loose and had a run back to the horse tops. The show played to two half houses.

Wednesday, June 27, Utica, New York: The three sections moved 85 miles on the New York Central to the railroad yards of Utica. Trains were spotted in town and it was a short haul to a wonderful grassy lot just north of town. The matinee did not start until 3:30 p.m., so once again Bobby Hasson had lots of time to bally the wonders of the

Barnum & Bailey sideshow. Both performances were uneventful as the punk elephants seemed to be on good behavior. Bob Dover and Pat Valdo were delighted. That night while loading out in Utica, Peter Brewer, the Superintendent of Seating, fell from a flat car and was hit by a section of the train while unloading and was sent to the hospital. A First of May circus gal, Adelle Gordon witnessed the accident, as she and a fellow dancer were walking by the flats. Sadly both of Brewer's legs had to be amputated.

Thursday, June 28, Syracuse, New York: A 47 mile run on the New York Central, brought us into the railroad yards of Solvay near the New York State Fairgrounds where we played on the infield. The big top and sideshow looked great on the green grass lot. It was a short haul to the lot and we did not see any union pickets there. Howard Y. Barry was the press agent for Syracuse and arrived at the red wagon with his usual newspaper clippings. The horse tops were on grass and all of the horses were busy munching on grass and by night you could see the bare ground. As usual, Robert de Vasconcellos was at the horse tops checking on his three dressage horses. He was a talented but difficult man and was noted for his temper. It was always enjoyable to watch him warm up his horses before his presentation. We did good business in Syracuse and all of us remembered the rain storm of 1955 when we played there. Edna and I sat outside the cars that night and we could look over and watch the teardown which went slowly because of the shortage of help. I watched the seat wagons being loaded at the runs and was still up when the first section, or Flying Squadron, left on a short jump to the next town.

Friday, June 29, Auburn, New York: A short jump of 26 miles brought us into little Auburn. Whenever we played the town the local paper went all out for the circus and there were always lots of locals watching the set up. We were also lucky as some punks were there hoping to earn a ticket to the show. George Werner put them to work spreading canvas and eventually helping to set up the seats for the big show. Ernie Burch, Albert White, and Gene Lewis went to town in the morning to seek out thrift shops and at noon they were back with their findings. During the matinee, one of the chimps in the de Jonghe act jumped off his seat and climbed up a quarter pole to the top of the tent. Trevor Bale came to the ring and helped catch the wayward animal by offering him treats. That night my mom came to the lot and Alfred Burton and I borrowed her car and drove to Clyde, New York where we spent the night with my aunt and uncle. Our plans were to drive to the next two towns, Rochester and Geneva.



Albert White, July 7, 1956, Buffalo, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

Saturday, June 30, Rochester, New York: The three sections moved from Auburn about fifty miles on the NYC to Rochester. Alfred and I were up early for our fifty mile drive from Clyde to the lot in Rochester. I went right to work helping Edna with the ticket distribution for the wagons and the inside sales. As usual the show was a bit late because of a help shortage and plenty of punks worked for tickets to the circus. Once again Bobby Hasson had plenty of time to "turn and tip" and bring the large crowd into the sideshow to see all the attractions. As always, little Harry Doll was out on the stage as Hasson lured the spectators into the kid show. Sometimes, Señorita Carmen, our beautiful snake charmer, appeared with a large python snake hanging around her neck to do the bally and invite spectators to attend the sideshow.

A large crowd gathered at the front door waiting to enter the menagerie and big show. Louis Gusso and other novelty men did excellent business that early afternoon, es-



pecially with the sale of little circus whips and toy swords. Once the door opened the crowd headed into the side walled menagerie to see all the elephants, giraffes, camels, zebras and other wild animals. My pal, Jackie Besser, did great business with his peanuts and orangeade, and crackerjacks. Almost four thousand folks attended the matinee and about six thousand that night and everyone on the show seemed to be in good spirits. That night Alfred Burton and I drove back to Clyde, to spend the night, before moving on to Geneva. We stopped at a Howard Johnson's for a late night snack just on the outskirts of Rochester.

July 1, Geneva, New York: The show trains arrived on the New York Central Railroad after a 53 mile jump. Geneva was a small city at the top of Seneca Lake of the Finger Lakes chain. It is the home of Hobart College and lots of college students were on the lot to watch the show's arrival. Some worked for tickets to attend the matinee. Alfred Burton and I drove over with my mom from Clyde and I was in the ticket wagon by 10:00 a.m. Later, in the morning, my friend Gordon Turner arrived from his home in Schenectady. While on vacation from General Electric, Gordon was planning on spending several days trouping with the circus. Gordon told me that he found the lot by following a show water wagon. Little did we know that it would be an eventful day!

We had a fair house for a Sunday matinee and for some reason it was decided to add an additional performance at 6:00 p.m. Once the small crowd was in the top and the show was underway came word that we were to be hit by a severe wind storm off of Seneca Lake. While the performers were preparing for the *Mexicanorama* aerial display, the seventh display in the show, sudden gusts of wind hit the big top so strong that the sets of quarter poles were lifted up and down with such force that they started to tear large holes in the canvas. George Werner and his crew sprang into action trying to save the top, as ushers and performers helped screaming folks out of the tent and into the wind blow rain. This all happened while former Copa girl and new Ringling dancer Adelle Gordon was about to enter the ring for the web production number.

I closed the windows on my yellow ticket wagon and watched the big show marquee blow down in the first gust of wind. I then went to check on my mom and Edna. They were safe in Edna's ticket distributing wagon. Luckily, the sideshow top was not damaged.

As the wind hit, Jimmy Armstrong blew his bugle warning every one of the trouble. Dick Anderson preparing for spec was heard to shout "there she goes!" as large sections of the big top fluttered to the ground. Gordon Turner watched in amazement as the horse tops were lifted away and the scared stock pulled on the picket lines. Grooms scurried to capture and calm the frightened horses. Luckily,

Alfred Burton performing as depicted in the 1956 program.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection



Placing the runs to unload the first section, July 2, 1956, Elmira, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

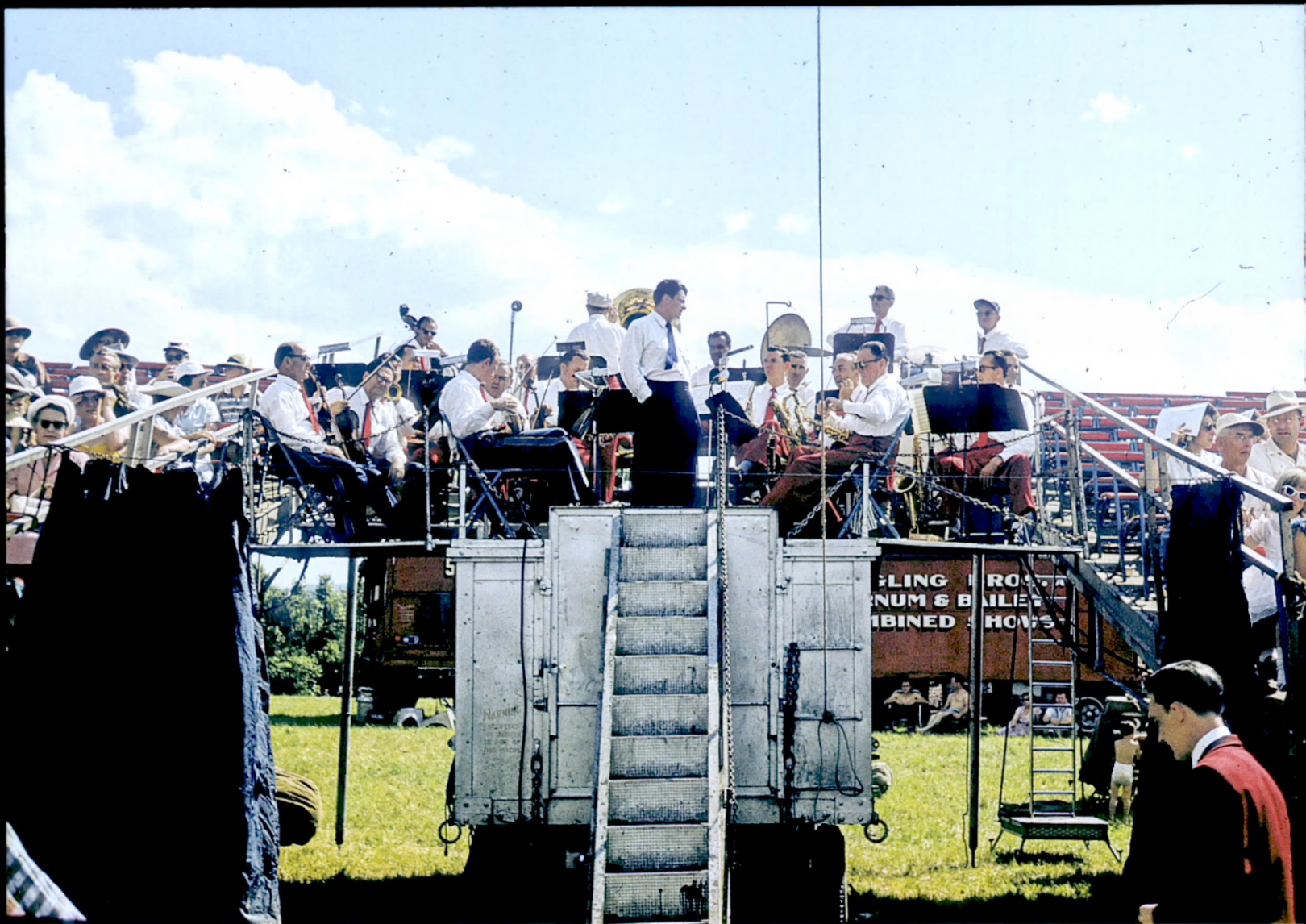
the band top and the wardrobe tops stood during the storm. Bob Dover got performers into the top to assist patrons escape and made sure his boss Pat Valdo was safely in his office wagon with Mrs. Valdo. Show Manager Lloyd Morgan and Legal Adjuster Noyelles Burkhart hurried into the big top, supervising the escape of worried patrons. George Werner and his assistant Bing had all the big top crew in the top lowering quarter poles before they fell. Once the audience was out of the tent the teardown was underway. Ambulances, medics, and sheriff's deputies arrived to assist any hurt patrons and several folks were taken to the local hospital.

When all the patrons were safely out of the destroyed tent, teardown began. Canvas had to be unlaced, and the torn sections rolled up for loading, cables and rigging had to be removed, and all the electrical equipment removed and loaded. The seat wagons were slowly torn down by the

ushers, candy butchers, and several performers. Other performers were tearing down their rigging and making sure it was not damaged. Finally the bale rings were lowered from their poles and the giant center poles slowly lowered for loading on the long pole wagon. It was a sad day for George Werner and his big top crew. In his many years on the road he had not had a blow down like this and lost a big top.

I stood by and watched the ring stock horses and their grooms head down the road to the cars and thought to myself how lucky we were not to have lost a single horse. Finally, Edna and I bid goodbye to my mom and we took the show bus to the cars while wondering what the next day would bring. Gordon Turner saved a large piece of the 1956 big top and has in his circus collection. One day it will be given to the Ringling Museum and go back to Sarasota.

July 2, Elmira, New York: A jump of 73 miles brought the trains into Elmira. Monday was a bright sunny day,



Izzy Cervone's band on the band stand, July 2, 1956, Elmira, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

as the silver Ringling trains arrived in the Elmira Railroad yards and the cuts were made so that the storm battered show could be unloaded. It was a long haul to the Chemung County Fairgrounds in Horseheads, New York. There was no Betty Hutton, Merle Evans, or Capt. William Heyer riding Starless Night leading a circus parade to the show grounds and no one shouting "We'll give a show Merle" as happened in the film *Greatest Shows on Earth*. There were just performers, big top crew men, ushers, set crew men, and candy butchers, all following the orders of George Werner, and Lloyd Morgan as stakes for guy wires were driven, center poles raised and the rigging process for an outdoor show to begin. Seat wagons were hauled in the open arena to be spotted and props to be unloaded. Ushers and butchers began the process of setting up the seats by unloading the stringers and tossing the bibles. Finally, all the seats were up and ready, except some sections of seats damaged during the storm. While this was happening

ring curb and props were unloaded and lighting and sound systems were spotted for the late performance. Performers who did aerial acts were required to do their own rigging. Bob Reynolds and his riggers were sorely missed. Trevor Bale's cat act did not work and Albert Rix did not work his popular bear act.

Bobby Hasson held the audience on the midway as he made constant openings for the kid show and Paul Fisher sold lots of hamburgers and hot dogs at his stick joint. Doors opened at 4:00 p.m. and the audience entered the side walled menagerie to see the elephants, tigers, camels, and giraffes. Jackie Besser did a good business selling lots of "flukum," orangeade to non-show folks.

Once the show started Rudy Bundy, Edna Antes, and I joined Noyelles and Hilda Burkhart in the cookhouse for a fine dinner. Mr. Staley's cookhouse had not been damaged by the storm. After dinner, I took a minute to stop by the horse picket lines to visit some of my groom pals and



Justino Loyal riding act, July 2, 1956, Elmira, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

favorite horses Pete, Pat, and Greyhound. I then hurried back to the yellow ticket wagon to begin the night sale of reserved seats.

Luckily, it was a clear beautiful night as the "Greatest Show on Earth" gave a moonlight open air performance in Elmira. We had a good audience, once again proving that Americans love the circus.

Later that night, my friend Alfred Burton and I walked from the train to a little diner in town and enjoyed home fried potatoes, bacon and eggs and mugs of hot coffee. It had been a long day and we were tired as we walked back to the cars. The train crew was still loading the flats before moving on to the next town, as Alfred and I entered our sleepers.

July 3, Olean, New York: We moved 122 miles west to Olean, in the southwest corner of the Southern Tier of New York state. The railroad yards were full of townies waiting to see the train unload and the elephants and horses walk to

the lot. Once again, we were lucky as it was a bright sunny day for open air performances. It was slow going again and the matinee did not start until 4:30 in the afternoon. Welders were busy repairing damaged flying rigging and other props and seat wagon department men were busy repairing broken seats. Everyone seemed unhappy on the show especially because of the lack of leadership and knowledge from Michael Burke, John Ringling North's First of May, General Manager. Manager Lloyd Morgan was working hard to keep the department head going and at the same time the show was fighting the Teamsters Union in every town.

July 4, Dunkirk, New York: After an 80 mile jump into Dunkirk we found a beautiful western New York summer day greeted us. The big show was in town and between shows there was to be the traditional July 4 circus party. We couldn't wait for the matinee to start and be over.

We all were looking forward to the fine July 4 dinner in the cookhouse. I remember that Mr. Staley and his cooks



Performers in the seats watching other performers put on a show between the matinee and night show, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

went overboard with lots of iced shrimp, roast beef and gravy, tons of mashed potatoes, sweet corn on the cob, huge slices of chocolate cake, and strawberry short cake. No one left the cookhouse hungry and all of the meal was served by our beautiful Ringling show girls instead of our regular waiters.

After a few remarks by Michael Burke thanking everyone for being fine hard working troupers, the festivities began. There was a funny clown walk around featuring Maggie Smith as clown Gene Lewis in drag, Gladys Rimmer as popular clown Lou Nagy, Anna Del Monte dressed as the boxing Freddy Freedman, and Margo Markis as the one and only white face clown Albert White. Everyone in the audience enjoyed the ladies' "on the spot" impersonations of clown alley favorites. This was followed by clown Dennis Stevens doing a very funny contortion act. Next was a comedy cat act with whips and pedestals, pith helmets, and funny cats in wild antics. Trevor Bale enjoyed every minute

of this spoof. This was followed by a comedy routine by Justino Loyal, Mrs. Loyal, and Oscar Canestrelli poking fun at the popular Whirlwind acrobats. Justino as usual was the hit of the show. Dolly Loyal did a low trapeze act featuring heel and toe catches. It all ended with the Trevor Bale children, Gloria and Dawnita and little Elvin doing a spec parade with their little pet rabbit riding in the red wagon.

The big show did good July 4 business in Dunkirk with a one half matinee and three quarter night house. It was a warm starry night as the audience walked out of the arena and the workers began tearing down the seat wagons. An old man stopped to chat with me as he left and told me about seeing Tom Mix in Dunkirk years ago. Seems that Mix was having car trouble and he took his vehicle to a local garage for repairs. After, Tom invited the mechanic and garage crew to a local pub. When he walked in Mix said "The drinks are on Tom Mix." As Poodle Hanneford once told me, "Tom Mix was the salt of the earth."



One of the blue and white striped ticket wagons in Buffalo, New York, July 8.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

As the show ended the cookhouse, sideshow, and menagerie wagons were all being loaded at the New York Central runs by the Ringling razorbacks. Before long, the first section or "flying squadron" was leaving for Niagara Falls.

July 5, Niagara Falls, New York: After a 58 mile jump north, we arrived in the Falls New York Central yards. The old 1954 four pole top arrived from Sarasota and in the early morning hours George Werner and his crew began the difficult job of spreading the canvas and starting the rigging process. Repairs had to be made on the old tent and as a result it was necessary to cancel the matinee. Once again the Ringling sideshow did great business as a good crowd was on the lot. Ticket sellers in the wagons were busy selling tickets for the evening show and refunding matinee tickets. A ticket seller name Lee Brown was doing the refunds in one window and Ken Mayo was selling night show tickets. Lee Brown was the husband of the great aerialist Wini-fred Colleano and Ken Mayo was later one of the founders

of Showfolks of Sarasota. I enjoyed working with both of these gentlemen

That night in Niagara Falls it was great to see the Ringling big top in the air and the American flag flying proudly with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows flags on the other four poles. All of the performers were pleased to be working in the comfort of the big top and the production numbers again looked grand in the circus tent atmosphere, with the blue canvas overhead.

Once again, those that stayed to see the teardown could watch the big top flutter to the ground as the side poles were suddenly removed. Workers were careful to unlace, fold, and roll the old top before the sections were loaded into the waiting canvas trucks.

July 6, Batavia, New York: A 58 mile jump on the New York Central brought the show trains into Batavia. There were good crowds at the runs watching the unloading process and large crowds at the lot. Edna and I rode the bus



The band in the finale production number, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

The spec on the hippodrome track, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library





Elephant act at Winter Quarters, 1956.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

Takeo Usui walking up a long cable, July 3, 1956, Olean, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library





Pinito del Oro doing a head stand on the trapeze bar, her final trick, July 2, 1956, Elmira, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

to the lot and then walked to the cookhouse for breakfast. Again, it was a sunny day for the big show. Luckily the matinee started at 3:15 since many performers want to go to the movie house in town to see the movie *Trapeze* as flyer Sally Marlow and catcher Dick Anderson were in the film.

July 7 and 8 Buffalo, New York: We were on a beautiful grassy lot in Buffalo for the two day stand. Saturday matinee was a bit late but had good attendance at both shows. Saturday night some show folks went to the Town Casino night club to enjoy a show and a bit of gambling. Others went to Shea's Theater, a grandiose vaudeville house and picture palace. It was here that Sophie Tucker once introduced the song "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee." I went with friends to Shea's.

Local restaurants and pubs were busy hosting circus performers and some performers even checked into local hotels to get away from the cars for two nights.

Sunday's matinee was well attended with three quarter house but immediately after the blow off word was received that a storm was approaching. Lloyd Morgan and George Werner cancelled the evening show, as they did not want to take a chance with the old tent in severe weather. Down the big top went and was loaded before any rain or severe weather. By early evening all of the show was loaded and ready to head on to the next town. Late that afternoon Evy Karoly and others in the backyard bid goodbye to a young man from Bristol, Connecticut who had spent several days visiting his circus pals. He was driving back to Bristol in his beautiful new Studebaker, a gift from his uncle for lots of hard work in the family rivet factory. Pete Kinosh was sad to leave but he never realized that he would never see his beloved circus in the Ringling big top again.

Monday, July 9, Warren Pennsylvania: With a 93 mile jump on the New York Central and Allegheny and Eastern Railroad we arrived in Warren yards. Warren was a small city of 12,000 in western Pennsylvania, just



The four blue and white striped ticket wagons, July 8, 1956, Buffalo, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

south of the New York state line. It was one of the towns where oil was first drilled for in the USA and a good small city for the show to play on a Monday.

Once again the matinee did not start until 3:30 in the afternoon and it was light in attendance. The evening performance amounted to a three quarter house and the locals enjoyed all of the circus acts. There was great applause for Pinito del Oro on the high trapeze and Harold Alzana on the high wire. As usual, Justino Loyal brought the house down with his comedy riding antics.

July 10, Erie, Pennsylvania: The three trains moved west to Erie and were spotted in the New York Central yards by early morning. With a long haul to the lot and a slow set up, due to shortage of help, the matinee had to be cancelled. I spent part of the afternoon in the pass booth working with Hilda Burkhart. We were busy exchanging passes for evening tickets and collecting the tax fees. It was always fun and profitable to work the tax booth, especially

with Miss Hilda with her wonderful stories of the Nelson Family performing days.

The evening show was almost full and it seemed that before long we heard the band playing the finale hit song "Hoop Dee Doo." The Cordon bull whip act, near the closing, made toy whips so popular that the novelty men on the blow off were busy selling the ever popular circus whips. Charlie Moroski's popular son, Emrich, enjoyed cracking and selling whips at this time and earning money for college.

Wednesday, July 11, Meadville, Pennsylvania: A short jump of 49 miles moved us into this western Pennsylvania town noted for the manufacture of talon zippers and for Allegheny College. We were late and the matinee did not start until 6:30 in the evening. Heavy rains made the lot a sea of mud and it was impossible to spot the heavy seat wagons. Prop men and performers had to move props, ring curb, and riggings from the parked wagons to the top. Large



A Cat pushing a seat wagon into the big top, July 10, 1956, Erie, Pennsylvania.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

crowds gathered around the ticket wagons and marquee waiting for the performance to begin. It was announced that there would be no seating and customers would gain admission by purchasing general admission tickets for the menagerie and performance. No one at the show remembered a time like this but there was an audience and "the show must go on."

The band struck up the overture and the show began with patrons sitting on the ground and performers ready to appear.

Ushers helped protect the audience for display after display and when the first clown walk around began the merry makers camped it up with the audience. It proved difficult for the performers and those driving floats during the spec *Say it with Flowers*. The teamsters were careful as they drove around the hippodrome track. Later ushers were especially careful to keep the audience safe as the King Ranch stallions entered the center ring for the liberty

act. Candy butchers made their way around the top selling cotton candy, popcorn, candy apples and bottles of ice cold coke. After the finale, it was a happy audience that left the enclosure of the big top and headed down the midway to their cars. At 10:00 p.m. the evening show began, again with a good audience sitting on the ground. Pat Valdo ordered a "John Robinson" performance and by midnight the big top was fluttering to the ground.

July 12, Youngstown, Ohio: With a 60 mile run on the Pennsylvania Railroad we were in the steel town but we found a large revival tent on the lot where we were to show. The circus had contracted the lot first but the owner made a mistake with dates. As a result we were delayed while they tore down the preacher's tent.

When they were out of the way George Werner and crew started working on our top. Once again we had a late matinee and night performances. I was busy selling tickets for the matinee and night show so the day went fast for



Spreading the big top canvas, July 12, 1956, Youngstown, Ohio.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

me. Before long it was time to join Edna and Miss Hilda in the cookhouse for a late dinner. Walking back to the yellow wagon I ran into "Seacow" an usher who eventually became a clown on other shows. He was a most unusual but friendly circus character.

Before the night show, our outside wagon man, Meeks, stood by my ticket wagon and chatted with me about his days on the Cole show working for bossman, Mr. Zac Terrell. Meeks loved Cole Bros. circus and enjoyed saying "This ain't the Cole show." He was a distinguished black gentleman who was always ready for a call from Noyelles Burkhardt, a circus man he admired.

Once again, teardown went slowly due to the shortage of ushers and general laborers. It was in the wee hours of the morning that the sections were loaded and our trains pulled out for the run to our next town.

July 14, Akron, Ohio: A short jump of 51 miles on the PRR brought us into the Akron yards. It was here that

Ringling played the Rubber Bowl after the terrible Hartford fire in 1944. One section of the show train was derailed and as a result the show was so late that the matinee was cancelled. When we did get the ticket wagons open there were long lines of customers standing in queue at each wagon. Rudy Bundy was pleased to see the good business and stood outside on the midway smoking his usual cigar. Rudy had a big smile on his face. The night show was a "straw house" and as a result Pat Valdo was forced to cut the elephants *Ringling Rock and Roll* number for safety reasons. Soon the organ was playing the music for the Nocks as they swayed back and forth on their wooden poles along the hippodrome track. The band then struck up the finale number and before long the audience was walking out of the tent onto the midway, many humming the music.

After the ticket wagons were closed and starting the haul to the train, Rudy Bundy, Edna Antes, and I boarded the bus for the yards. So long Akron, Ohio.



Union picket line at one of the 1956 stands.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

July 14, Canton, Ohio: After a 46 mile move on the PRR we arrived in town. Once again the matinee was late, largely because of the shortage of help. Laborers were being paid by union thugs not to work and the small usher crew and candy butchers were tired of their daily struggle to set up the big show. If possible, local help was hired but these greenhorns did not really fit in or know the routine. There was a rhythm to spreading the canvas, lacing the sections, setting up the side poles, tossing the seat bibles, and setting up the seats. Many times these men were just in the way or confused by the routine. Jimmy Hoffa's Teamsters Union was proving to be a real threat to our survival. Their pickets were out in front on every lot with their signs reading "Circus Employees on Strike" or "Ringling Refuses Collective Bargaining." These were all lies but one that kept some union folks away from our show.

That evening John Ringling North arrived in Canton and immediately boarded his private railroad car the JO-MAR. North had reluctantly come to the conclusion that he had to be serious and give his attention to his show. He

did not have Arthur M. Concello there to solve the show's problems.

Edna Antes kept most of her thoughts about our situation to herself. I knew that she was a Concello person and even though she liked Rudy Bundy and Michael Burke, she knew that changes had to be made. When I kiddingly said to her "Edna, this old rag bag is in trouble we need leadership here," Edna would smile and say "Bill don't call it a rag bag."

That night the show was slowly folded up and off again to the next town. It was a struggle for the "old gal." Once on the train, I sat down with my portable typewriter and wrote a note to Paul Eagles telling him of our troubles and lack of leadership.

July 15, Alliance, Ohio: A short 18 mile jump into town on the PRR and as the trains were being moved into the yards, the third section was jolted so hard that Pinito del Oro was injured as was Mrs. Francisca Oliveras. In the horse cars Evy Karoly's horse Charlotte fell and a received a severe gash in her hind quarters. Once again it was a late



Rock and Roll production number, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

and slow setup. Once the top was up and the seat wagons set, John Ringling North visited the lot accompanied by Rudy Bundy. North was not pleased by the condition of his show and it was obvious to him that tough decisions had to be made. He asked Rudy Bundy to join him at the JOMAR that evening after closing. A worried and depressed John Ringling North went back to his private car to spend an uncomfortable day.

The matinee started at 6:00 p.m. but all of us on the show went on with our daily routine of selling tickets, souvenirs, popcorn, ice cold coke and giving another performance. "Children of all ages" were to be entertained and entertained they were that summer day in Alliance, Ohio.

July 16, 1956, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: A 75 mile jump on the PRR brought us into the railroad yards. Edna Antes and I were up early, rested, and ready to face another day. We discovered a little eatery near the runs and we stopped for a quick breakfast. We had no idea of what was in store for us that July day.

Once we arrived on the lot, which was at the Heidelberg

Raceway, we were met by a tired, pale, worried looking Rudy Bundy. Rudy was standing near the rear of the silver wagon and said "Bill and Edna I have to tell you something but you are to keep it secret until later in the day." He then showed us the handwritten note by John Ringling North about the end of the tented era and told us that the show was closing. We couldn't believe what he was saying. He then added that later a formal announcement would be made and Edna and I went to her ticket distribution wagon.

We went on with our daily routine but quickly realized that the press and television folks were there. Once Bob Dover made his announcement to his performers sadness descended upon the big top and the show in general. Finally, we all realized that after teardown we would be loading up and heading back to Sarasota. I even believe legal adjuster Noyelles Burkhart was in shock.

At my between show break I went to the back yard to visit with Alfred Burton and his family, to see Evy Karoly and her horse Charlotte, and later had a chat with one of my favorite showgirls, little blonde and beautiful Irish Hill.

That late meal in the cookhouse was a sad experience as we realized that we would no longer enjoy Mr. Staley's meals and perhaps never see our waiters again. There was no joy in the cookhouse that final July day.

As evening descended, I was busy in the ticket wagon, selling reserved seats. When it was time to close the sale an elderly gentleman stuck his head into the window and said, "I want the last ticket!" and he gave me a ten dollar bill.

July 16, 1956 is the day I will never forget. It comes around every year and still haunts me. I will always remember the closing. A few years back I gave an interview to the wonderful writer, David Lewis Hammarstrom, for his book *Fall of the Big Top*, which is the best account of the final day. I urge everyone to obtain a copy of this book. I am very proud of a photograph of me in that book that was taken by my friend Ted Sato as I sat in the yellow ticket wagon waiting for a customer. This photo was taken in 1955 however.

Edna and I stayed on the lot, once the ticket wagons were closed, just to see the last few minutes of Ringling under canvas. At the end of the finale the band played "Hoop Dee Doo" and the audience rose to their feet and walked out into the lights of the midway. We stayed to hear the final sounds of teardown men shouting, bibles being tossed, quarter poles being lowered and loaded into their wagons, and the sound of the huge Caterpillars pulling wagons out of the tent. Soon, men were all around the tent standing at each side pole. When George Werner blew his whistle they pulled out the side poles and the huge bale rings were lowered and the canvas fluttered slowly to the ground.

I wanted to join in on the unlacing of the sections of the tent, as I had once done, but instead Edna, Gerry Usicki, and I joined a line to catch a bus back to our train.

Later that night I joined my friend Alfred Burton and Evy Karoly for a few cold beers. Everyone was thinking of the long train ride back to Sarasota and a trip to the Florida State Unemployment office. Some performers were anxious to call their agents to find booking for fair dates. It was a sad gathering of circus folks knowing that there would not be a "next day's town."

In the wee hours of the morning our train began the long haul to Sarasota. For the most part I stayed in my roomette and listened to my RCA portable radio as we passed thru the Allegheny Mountains and then south to Washington, D.C. and then on to Florida. Our show trains traveled as third rate freight and we had to wait on sidings for many scheduled trains to move by. Rudy Bundy once told my friend Pete Kinosh how terrible that last trip to Sarasota was for the show.



The author at his post in the ticket wagon for the 1955 season.
Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

When we arrived in Sarasota to a huge gathering of show folks and townies we could not believe the large crowds that came to see our arrival. Quickly we departed the train and Alfred and I were out on our Cushman motor scooters and heading to Lido Beach. I spent a week in Sarasota and then took a train from Sarasota to New York and finally home to upstate New York. Alfred Burton and his family drove me to the station and I bid goodbye to my friends as I boarded the Seaboard train.

Sadly, I never saw the Alfred Burton Family again but I did receive letters from Alfred as he played dates in Paris, Berlin, and Tivoli Park in Sweden. Years later, I visited Ringling in Glens Falls, New York and former clown Duane Thorpe was selling programs on the come in. I asked him about Alfred and he told me that he had passed away as the results of an aneurism. His hometown was Nuremberg, Germany.

After a short time in upstate New York, I called Willis Lawson and he asked me to join him and Shirley Coombs



Alfred Burton and Gerry Usicki.

Author's Collection

on the Cristiani circus. I met them in Wilmington, Delaware and worked concessions on the circus until the end of the season. It was my first experience on a truck show but I survived the season and we closed in Sarasota. I enjoyed working with the fine performers and colorful characters on the Cristiani Show. I will never forget "Iowa," a candy butcher who walked to town every day. His real name was Herbert Farrington. Then there was a character, Candy Apple John, from Tennessee and I rode from town to town with him many nights. On the kids show there was Charlie Rourke, Jelly Roll and the colored band, and Señor Carlos, the fire eater from Mexico via Philadelphia.

Mamma and Pappa Cristiani sat at the front door for every come in, Pete ran the concessions, and of course all the Cristiani family took part in the strong performance. Lucio was at his prime in the riding act and also did a strong comedy boxing routine. Harry Dann was the show announcer. I also got to know Kenny Dodd, a clown noted for his washer woman routine. I admired the dressage rid-

ing of Davisio Cristiani on a beautiful American saddle bred horse.

I was exhausted when the Cristiani show closed and never wanted to see a candy apple again. I then hitched a ride north with show agent Jackie Rosenheim, whose home was in Ogdensburg, New York. We stopped to visit the Clyde Beatty railroad show in Atlanta, Georgia. I went to dinner with Edna Antes, who had landed there, and Frank McClosky and they asked me to become a ticket seller on the Beatty show. I joined and spent the rest of the season back on a railroad show. I went downtown every morning to pick up the advance sale and then back at the lot sold reserved seats in the big top. It was like homecoming with all the former Ringling folks there.

After Beatty closed, once again I was off to upstate New York and then to a teaching job in Savannah, New York. I again joined Beatty, during the summer breaks, and worked with Theo Forstall, Edna Antes, and Walter Rairden. I did this for several summers.

In 1966 I met the Ringling show in Chicago and began working for Lawson who then ran the Ringling concessions. I sold "garbage" for the next several weeks as we moved to Milwaukee then across Canada playing Calgary, Banff, and then, down to Portland, Seattle, and eventually on to San Francisco and Los Angeles. I enjoyed selling balloons at the blow offs. I had a knack at ducking out a balloon to pretty girls and watching their boyfriends reluctantly dig into their pockets to pay me.

In Canada one day we rolled south through the Thompson River Valley and I enjoyed the scenery visiting with old clown Walter Guice. This is one of the most beautiful train rides in North America and one I will always remember. It was a great experience, but I was not sold on buildings. I enjoyed playing the fairgrounds in Seattle and the taping of the Ringling General Foods Show with host Ed Wynn. After Portland we headed south past Mt. Rainer, with a food and water stop in Klamath Falls, Oregon. We then showed San Francisco and then moved on to Los Angeles. The circus moved into the new building and I checked into a hotel across the street. In the afternoon I took my laundry bags down the street and found a Laundromat in the Watts area.

That evening I was watching television when I learned of the Watts riots. I looked out my hotel window and saw the skyline of Watts burning and bus after busload of Los Angeles police heading to the riot zone. By morning I realized that the circus would be cancelled for several days and that I would have time to play tourist. In Hollywood, I



Center ring elephants in the Rock and Roll production number, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

bought my first little transistor radio to keep aware of the city's problems. It was a dangerous time.

I went back to the building the next day and told Lawson that I had booked a flight to New York. A riot ended my second career on Ringling. I never looked back.

I stayed away from anything circus for many years. Then four years ago at eighty years of age, I decided I wanted to start where my circus life all began, working on ring stock. I went out with my friends Lance Ramos Kollman and Jennifer Walker on the Cole Show and had an enjoyable summer caring for the mixed act; two white ponies, two lamas, and two camels. My dog, Shadow, also enjoyed the tour and was a fine trouper. He really loved the Cole cookhouse and their left overs. **BW**

One day I will write about that tour but for now this is the end.

I want to thank my friend of many years Circus Fan Gordon Turner for encouraging me to write about the circus, and my friend Kenny Dodd and Peter Kinosh for all of their knowledge and assistance. Also, thanks to Charles Schlarbaum for his input. Finally, my pal, Jim Elliott, who struggled along with me as an unpaid research assistant for this project.

Many thanks to Deborah Walk, Curator of the Ringling Museum, and Jennifer Lemmer Posey, Editor of the Bandwagon, for their patience with this writer.

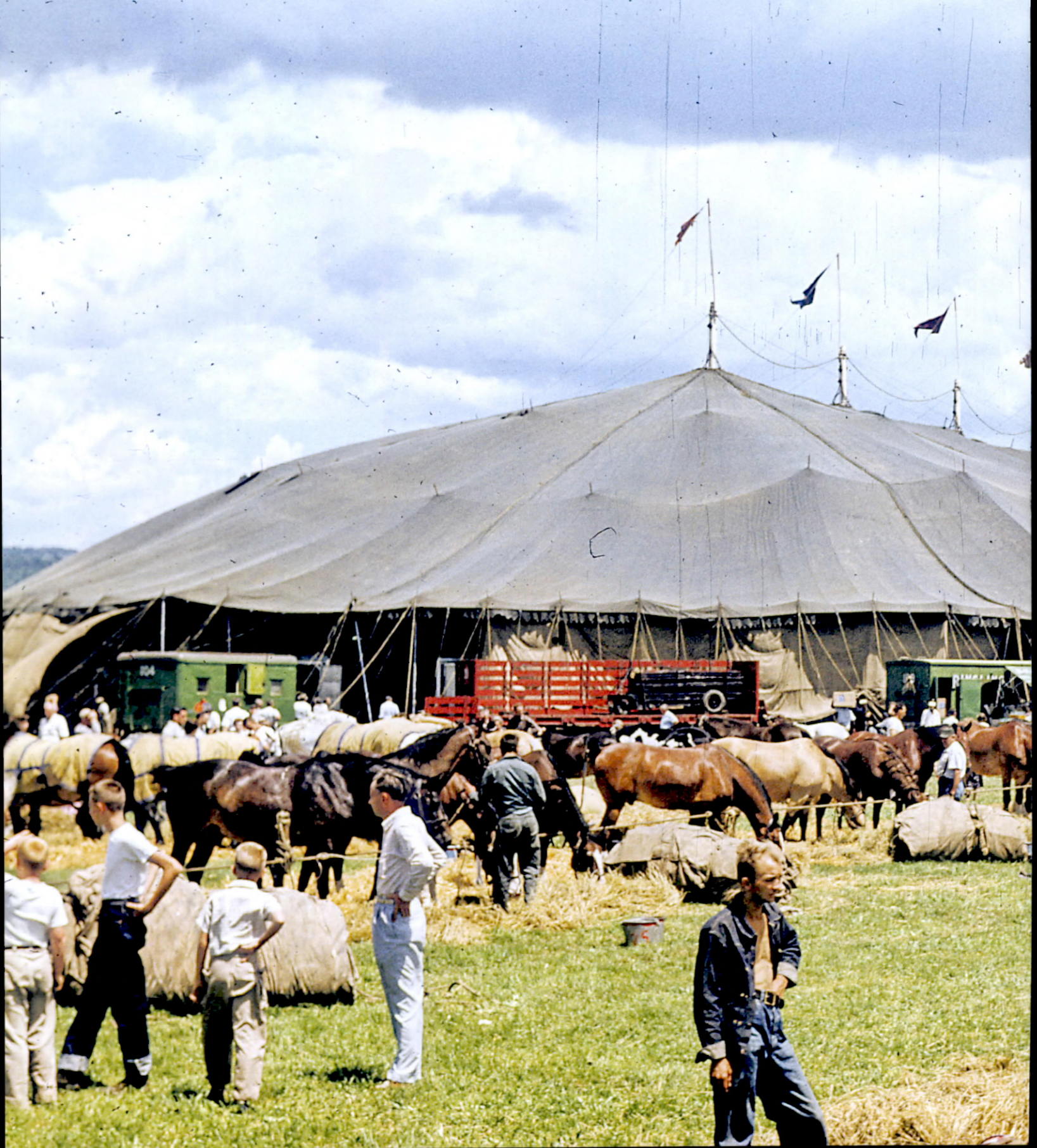


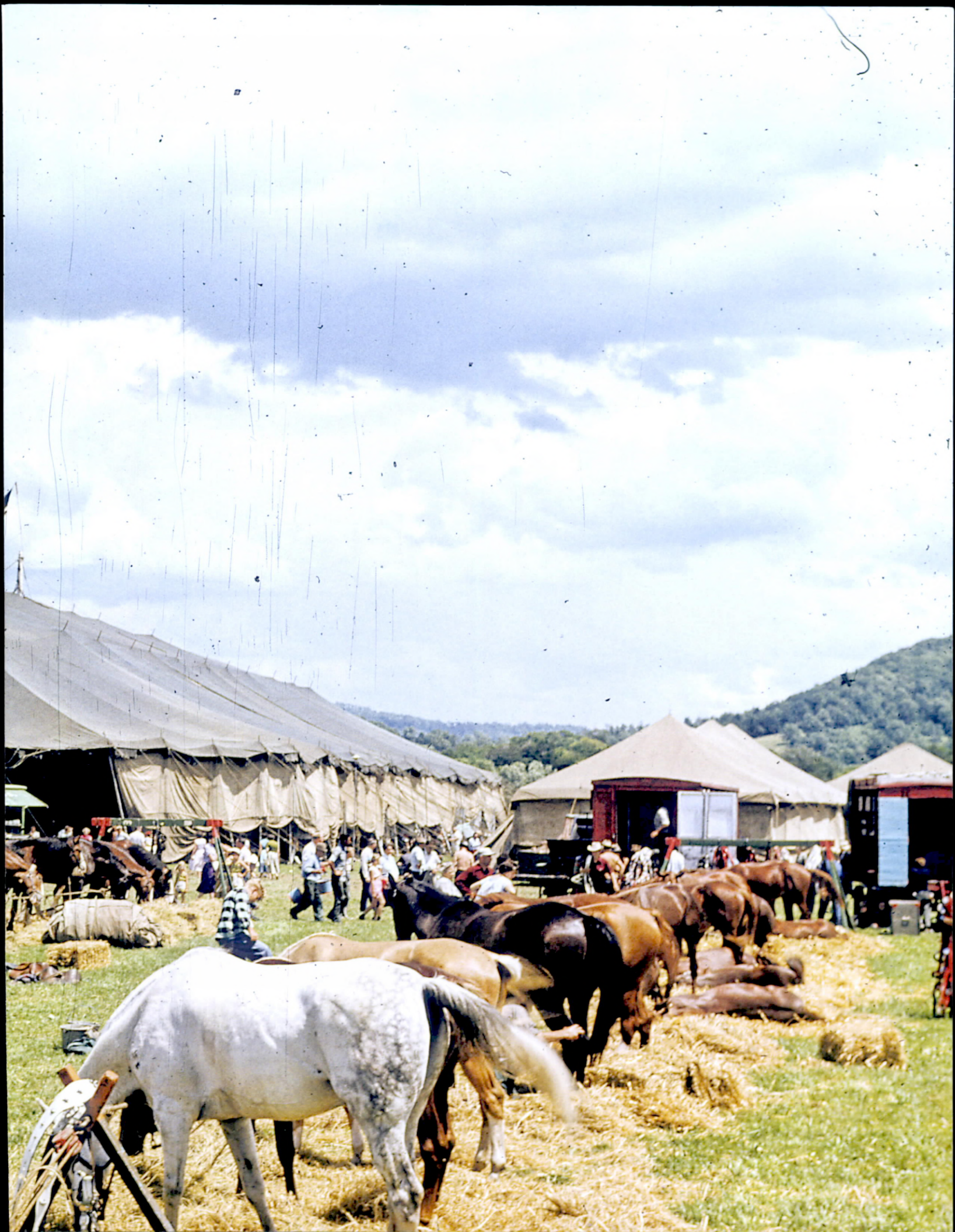
One of the Nelson brothers on stilts in the spec, July 4, 1956, Dunkirk, New York.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library

The four pole big top and horses staked out in the open. The show lost both the big top and horse tents at Geneva, New York, the night of July 1, 1956. This was the 1954 big top flown up from Sarasota after the blow down. July 9, 1956, Warren, Pennsylvania.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library







This ticket, for the July 17th date at Moundsville, West Virginia was never used.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

24-sheet poster stand for Dunkirk, New York, July 4, 1956.

Illinois State University Special Collections, Milner Library



SEASON

NUMBER

1956

4



New York Office
10 Rockefeller Plaza

General Offices and Winter Quarters
SARASOTA, FLORIDA

Allow Mail Enough Time to Reach Points Named Before Date Given

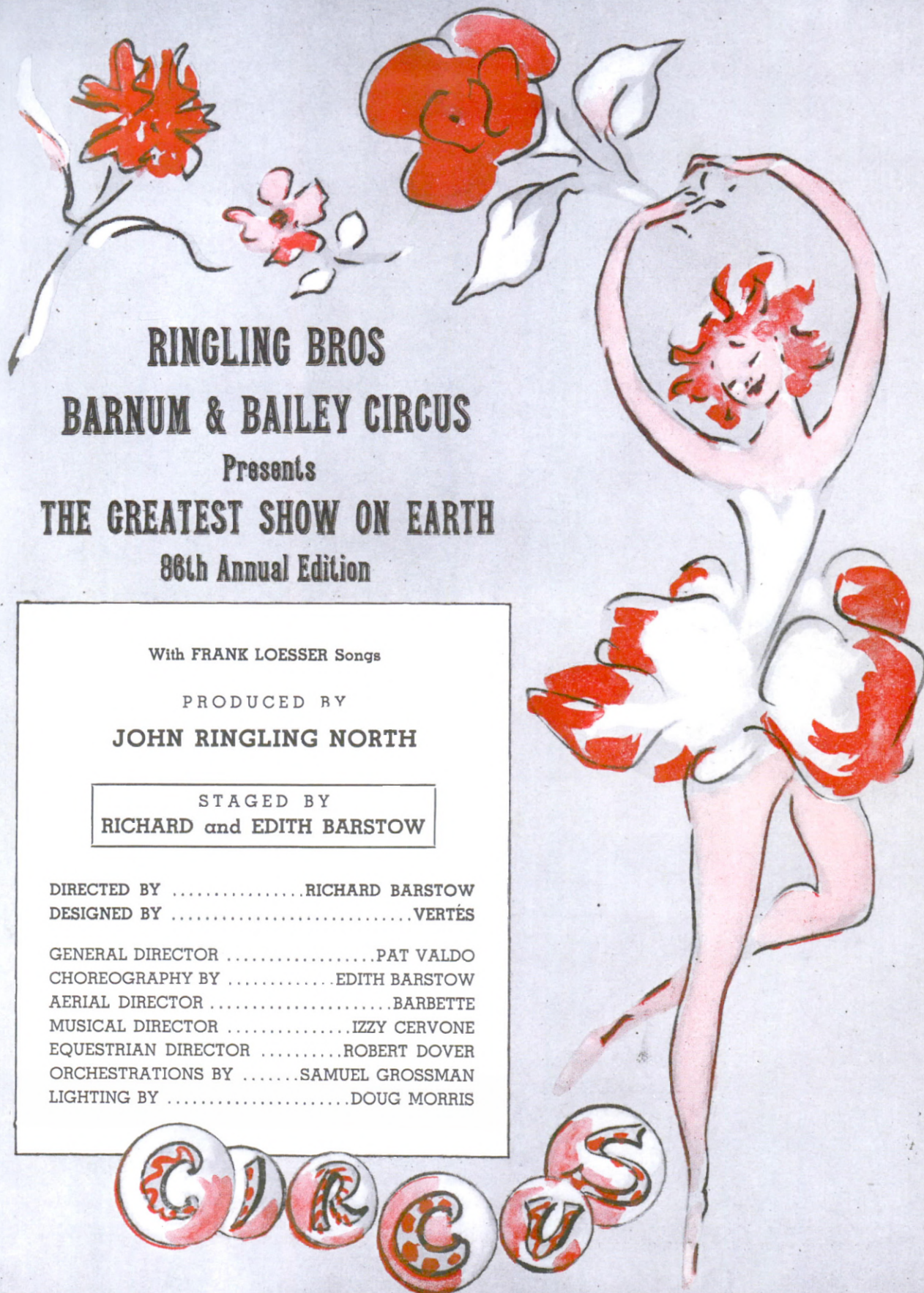
DATE	TOWN	STATE	RR	MILES
THU JULY 5	NIAGARA FALLS	NEW YORK	NYC	58
FRI " 6	BATAVIA	"	NYC	39
SAT " 7	BUFFALO	"	NYC	25
SUN " 8	"	"		
MON " 9	WARREN	PENNSYLVANIA	NYC-PRR	93
TUE " 10	ERIE	"	PRR-B&LE	75
WED " 11	MEADVILLE	"	B&LE-ERIE	49
THU " 12	YOUNGSTOWN	OHIO	ERIE-PRR	60
FRI " 13	AKRON	"	PRR	51
SAT " 14	CANTON	"	PRR	46
SUN " 15	ALLIANCE	"	PRR	18
MON " 16	PITTSBURGH	PENNSYLVANIA	PRR	75
TUE " 17	MOUNDSVILLE	WEST VIRGINIA	PRR-B&O	79
WED " 18	ZANESVILLE	OHIO	B&O	81
THU " 19	COLUMBUS	"	B&O-PRR	74
FRI " 20	SPRINGFIELD	"	PRR	74
SAT " 21	DAYTON	"	PRR	35
SUN " 22	MIDDLETOWN	"	PRR	34

Season Closed Suddenly with explanation "the show under canvas is a thing of the past"

Final date sheet issued for the Ringling circus under canvas.

Ringling Museum, Tibbals Collection

All out and over



RINGLING BROS
BARNUM & BAILEY CIRCUS
Presents
THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH
86th Annual Edition

With FRANK LOESSER Songs

PRODUCED BY
JOHN RINGLING NORTH

STAGED BY
RICHARD and EDITH BARSTOW

DIRECTED BY RICHARD BARSTOW
DESIGNED BY VERTÉS

GENERAL DIRECTOR PAT VALDO
CHOREOGRAPHY BY EDITH BARSTOW
AERIAL DIRECTOR BARBETTE
MUSICAL DIRECTOR IZZY CERVONE
EQUESTRIAN DIRECTOR ROBERT DOVER
ORCHESTRATIONS BY SAMUEL GROSSMAN
LIGHTING BY DOUG MORRIS